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STORY YUYUKO TAKEMIYA

ART YASU

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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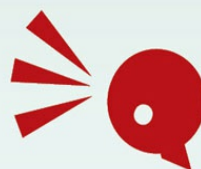


VOLUME 6

story **Yuyuko Takemiya**

illustrations **Yasu**

Class 2-C, looks like
you've got some time. What would you
do if you were class president?





Takasu Ryuuji

"I'm not free, I'm cleaning the dust stuck in the window railing. Jeez, whenever anyone opens the window, the dust from the yard comes in. If I were student council president, I would distribute one of these Takasu sticks to everyone. Then anyone could clean any dirt they see immediately, regardless of whether they're in class or taking a break. That would mean every student would be part of the beautification committee 365 days a year, 24 hours a day."



"Oh, don't take it for granted. If you make sure to wash it properly, you can use it over and over again. Don't go thinking you can wear it down to rags and then try to return it."



Aisaka Taiga

“...udent...ouncil...esiden...?”

Oh, sorry. I seem to have
woken you. Good night.



“...Rodent...counselor...precedent...?”



Kushieda Minori

"Ahh, yeah, this thing is the best for getting earwax out. Oh, what did ya say? Student council president, you said?"

Yeah, how about it? Do you have any aspirations?



"I dooo, I do. Let's see, first, I was thinking I would let people go to and from school in their tracksuits if they want to. And then there's the clubroom buildings. They've smelled completely awful lately, so I think I'd apply to get them reconstructed and also have them made closer to the side of the school. Sometimes if you look at them from far away, you can see the odor around them, like a haze. The other day the girls from volleyball club said they got stuck in the bathrooms with some crickets, and it was a mess...whoa! That...huuurts! Oh, the Takasu stick went right in my ear! It's turned on me!"



Kawashima Ami

"Hmm...right...hmmm...uhh, and...there! I finally did it~! Look, look, I tried doing my own nail art! They look pretty good, don't they?! It was reaaaally tough, but it went pretty well! Ah. I wonder if I should fix this part a bit? Gently...gently..."

Excuse me, did you hear what I said? If you were student council president what...



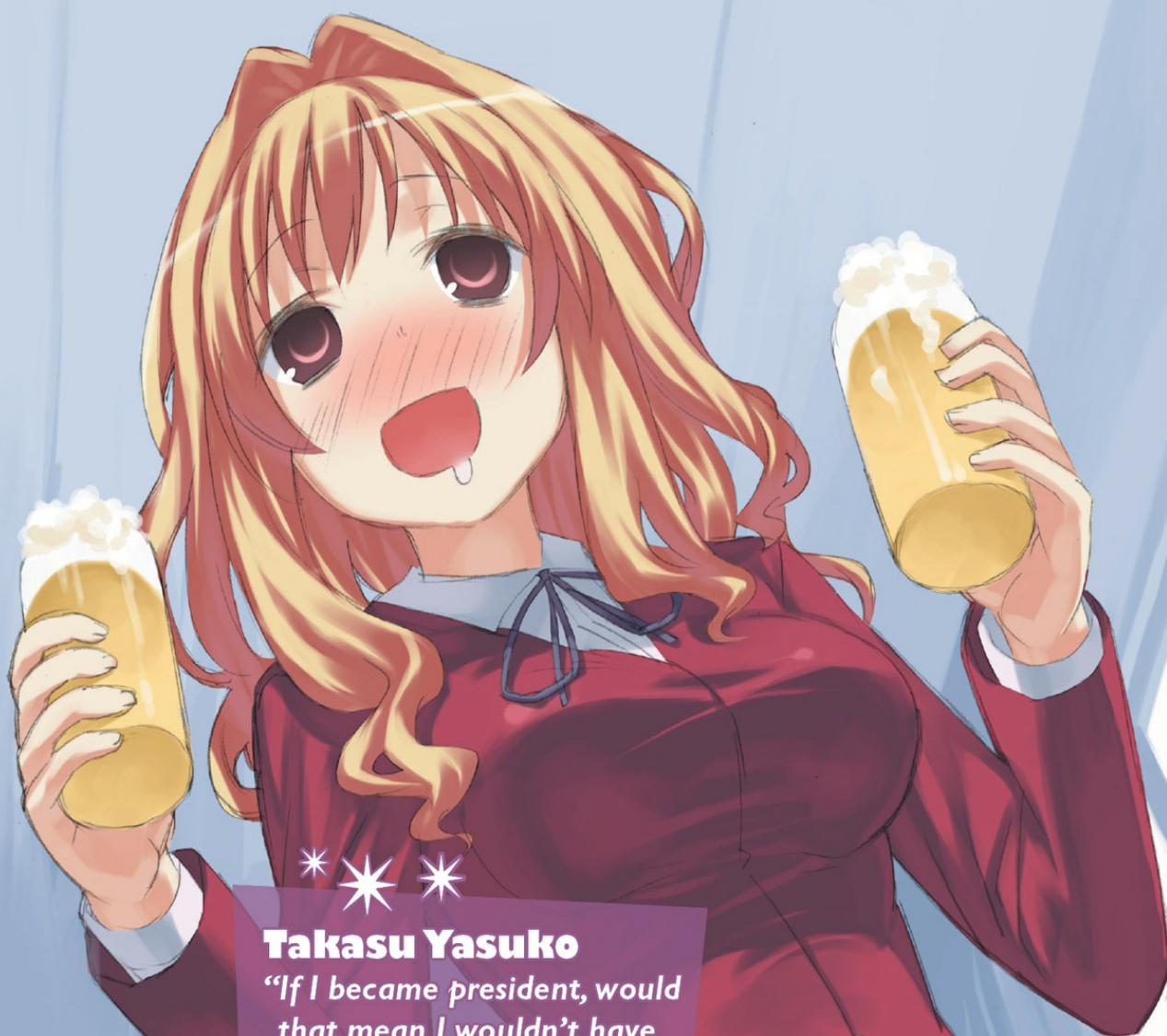
"Whaaaaat?! Gaaah, my nails! You've been getting in my way! What're you being so pushy for?! Huh?!"

Bachelorette (AGED 30)

“Let’s see, if I were student council president, I would take some of the school rules and give the students more autonomy by—”

Wait a second, this is going to cause problems. You’re the teacher, you’re not one of the students in class 2-C.

“Why does it matter? The fan is the twelfth player in the blue samurai team, right? Why can’t the homeroom teacher just be another 30-year-old classmate? ...Just kidding. That was a joke. C’mon, laugh. Hah hah hah, it’s funny right? Even though I’m thirty, I’m wearing a school uniform. I’m cosplaying a high schooler. Waah, it’s so funny, so funny...funny... No it’s not!”



Takasu Yasuko

“If I became president, would that mean I wouldn’t have to do homework~?”

Aren’t you the mother of a student? Please go home...



“So I don’t have to do homework~?”

You don’t have to, just go home.



“I did it. If I don’t have to study, I’m declaring this to be Bishamon Heaven Number Two. First, we’ll put a beer tap here! Beer! Beer! And then we’ll put a counter over here.”

Takasu-kuuun! Please come and collect your mother!





Something's wrong with the crowd favorite?! The student council president election starts on the next page! ➡

Toradora!

BY
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ILLUSTRATED BY
Yasu



Seven Seas Entertainment

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PRELUDE



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Prelude

Saturday.

The day-long culture festival was a foolhardy madhouse of commotion. Everyone's smiles and frowns, their excitement, enthusiasm, and passion—all of it contributed to the final campfire that scorched the night sky as it reached grandly to the heavens.

Then it was Sunday.

The responsibility of cleaning all traces of the idiotic commotion rested on the shoulders of the festival committee executives and the student council. They checked that each and every class's exhibition had come to a close, verified that the garbage was thrown out properly, and cleaned up the remnants of the campfire.

That year, they held a modest commemorative party in an obscure corner of the gym for the retiring third years. The acting chairperson, who was not prone to tears, said, "I have no regrets." Then he cried and buried his face in the bouquet he'd been handed amid applause. As she patted his back, the president, who also held the same bouquet in her cleaning glove-clad hands, flipped her hair.

"Right. I have something I want to discuss with everyone. I—"

She said it like it was nothing.

Chapter 1

“**A**nd then what happened, Ami-chan? Did you just let them tell you to take that huge thing?”

“It’s my job, so it’s not like I can say no. It was the worst. Especially since it was like this big~!”

“Okay, you’re saying it’s big, but aren’t they about that size? I’ve never seen one, though.”

“No, no, Maya, you’re being naive. It was seriously like this! Just! Like! This!”

She traced a strange shape in the air with both her hands as though she were doing an old-school breaststroke. As her arms rotated, she accidentally bumped someone who was sitting calmly at his seat. His silver-rimmed glasses clattered to his desk at the shock of the blunt impact.

“Oh no, I’m so sorry! It wasn’t on purpose... Oh, it’s just you, Yuusaku.”

Kawashima Ami, the perpetrator, apologetically turned towards the victim with her teary Chihuahua eyes. But those tears, and even her interest, coldly dried up in an instant, like a desert at night. She was a childhood friend of Kitamura Yuusaku, whom she had hit. Attempting to sway him with her good-girl act was just a waste of hospitality. *Hmph*. She sighed in irritation.

“Yeah, sorry, sorry. Here’s your glasses.”

With an insincere apology, Ami, in an act of goodwill, returned the fallen glasses to the bridge of her childhood friend’s nose.

But...

“Yuusaku?”

“...”

Kitamura—the ever straight-laced, dead serious but also strangely excitable and boisterous class representative, student council vice president, captain of the boys’ softball club, ever-busy event lover who, rumor had it, would

probably die like one of those migrating tuna fish if he ever stopped working—was currently a vacant, mouth-breathing, droopy-eyed zombie. He probably hadn't even realized he'd been hit. He wasn't even focusing on Ami, who was right in front of his eyes. He simply continued to sit in his seat without a sound.

“Hey, Yuusaku. He doesn't seem okay?”

“No way, no way.”

“Heeey, Maruo! Get it together!”

Kihara Maya poked at his cheek with her fingertip. When he didn't react to that, either, Maya's eyes met with those of Kashii Nanako beside her. Ami shrugged her slender shoulders. The exasperation in her beautiful, raised eyebrows overweighed her impatience. It wasn't as though Kitamura's strange behavior had started when Ami had hit him just now. At least, probably.

“He seems like he's kind of been getting worse and worse each day... Guess Maruo-kun's got burnout syndrome.”

Ami and Maya nodded in agreement at the words Nanako quietly let slip. They looked down on Kitamura in his living dead state.

Yes, it had been several weeks since the culture festival that had riled up the school. The event's excitement had already died down, and the students had been forced to return to their boring, everyday lives. At some point, the season transformed from vibrant fall to monochrome winter. The reddening fall leaves turned dry and dead until the wind outside the window, darkened by heavy clouds that stole the sunlight, blew them around in eddies. It was slightly before four in the afternoon. Class had ended, cleaning had ended, and now all they had to do was wait for homeroom to end in order to go home. They were in the vacuum of time before their teacher would arrive.

Kitamura's abnormal behavior had slipped in during those tedious days and, at some point, begun to devour him.

He became less talkative and stopped speaking during class. He didn't seem to be eating his bento at lunch, and his fly was down one out of every two days. His eyes were empty, and his glasses were covered with fingerprints and clouded with grease. By the time his friends realized something was wrong with

him, it was too late. His condition had progressed too far.

They assumed it was a matter of course after an event as large as the culture festival. Kitamura had probably burned himself out—that was what everyone in class 2-C understood it to be. His shabby state was also a symptom of burnout. The fact that his bangs, which should have been in a stick-straight line, were somewhat uneven was another. That he was more forgetful, that his school jacket was off by one button, that he staggered as he wandered through the halls and crashed into the walls, were all symptoms.

If he were inclined to focus on small, everyday things, he would probably have recovered, but the disease seemed serious. If Kitamura hadn't been surrounded by Ami, Maya, and Nanako, his eyes would have been completely devoid of light. They looked murky, like a dead bug's.

"A-Ami..."

"Wh-What is it?"

Suddenly, the corpse spoke up. He looked up into the beautiful face of his childhood friend, who was currently a popular model, and reached a hand trembling with the anticipation of death, like that of an old man, out to her.

Ami staunchly avoided him as though he were unpleasant, "Ew, stop it."

"You said something was 'big' just now... What did you mean? You couldn't have...taken a weird job... You can't mean—you can't mean it was a huge...pe..."

"Whaaaaat?! No way, what do you think you're saying?! Yuusaku, you're such an idiot!"

Aaaha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Though she might have learned it from someone else, Ami knew the most effective technique for shutting someone up. She slapped the reanimated corpse on the mouth. *Boof!* Kitamura's face easily turned to the side without resistance.

"The huge thing was a dog! A doggy woggy! They told me I was going to do the shoot with a poodle, so I thought it would be a little teddy bear and got all excited. Well, I had no idea, and this scary-looking, two-meter-tall giant dog comes out on a chain~! And that cameraman was like, 'This is a genuine poodle. Now, go hug it.' I was like, this has definitely got to be a llama, no matter how

you look at it! That's all it was. ♥ And it stunk like an animal, too. I don't really know what llamas are actually like though~! That was what we were talking about~! ♥”

I wonder what Maruo was going to say after “pe...”? Was it Pembroke corgi... or pear...or could he have meant? The girls who had unintentionally heard the conversation were whispering unpleasantly. Behind them, another conversation played out.

“I wonder if Kitamura is okay... I feel like he's got a lot on his plate.”

Right, right, a group of boys worriedly nodded together.

Burnout syndrome.

The boys were also engrossed in Kitamura's abnormal behavior, but they had a slightly different idea of what it meant. Unlike the majority that thought Kitamura had burned out, they, the minority, had an extreme view of the situation.

“I'm pretty worried about him. It's like he's becoming more and more pitiful.”

“Right. If the rumors are true, who knows what's happening to him.”

“She must be making him do all kinds of terrible things.”

“It's because he's up against that person...”

“I'd burn out, too. I'd be completely worn down. The picture of pity itself.”

“But, you know who we should really be pitying...huh? Actually, where did they go?”

Poor Takasu-kun...

“?!”

He turned so fast his neck nearly came off. He heard it. He definitely heard it.

A pair of psychotic eyes immediately fired off like lightning. Those eyes glared at random at the innocent high school students who were going down the hallway during their break. He stared at them one at a time, shooting them down.

Who was that just now?

“Eek?!”

Was it you...

“Whoa!”

Or you...

“Whaa?!”

You...

“What’re you loitering around for?!”

“Bah!”

His head was forced straight up by something that had plunged into his nostril. His nasal innocence was stolen by the deep and cold feeling of menthol. At the pain, Takasu Ryuuji returned to his senses. *What am I doing?* Evil had nearly overtaken him. He had been right on the verge of going from the guy with the delinquent (looking) face to the indiscriminate god of lightning (in the flesh) who would strike anyone down.

“Seriously, don’t you go around dragging and dawdling along, you loaf of a loiterer! End of the day homeroom will start before we even get there! If you have time to threaten people for no reason, get those lazy legs of yours moving, you lazy dog! You school-swimsuit-lecher steamed bun!”

Fwoosh. As she magnificently insulted him, she pulled out the thing she had stuck up his nose. It was lip balm; about three centimeters of the bare stick extended from the end. Her face contorted. It went without saying that the one who’d just given Ryuuji this forceful wake-up call was the beautiful thug Aisaka Taiga—better known as the Palmtop Tiger.

Her contemptuous face looked exactly like how a pretty flower smelled. Her elegantly dancing hair was soft, light, and long. She was slight as a delicate doll. Anyone would recognize her as a peerless beauty, but that beauty arrogantly

stuck out her chin. As she glared at Ryuuji, who stood beside her, she piled on the abuse, “You know what you are, you’re...*HA-CHOO!*”

Suddenly, she sneezed.

Snot! Gross! It happened faster than Ryuuji could jump away from it. “Nnnggghhhhhhhh!”

Pitiful death throes flooded from Taiga’s mouth. *When you go looking for revenge, dig two graves.* Long story short, it served her right. At the same time she sneezed, the raw lip balm she had pushed up Ryuuji’s nostril slipped deep into Taiga’s own small nose.

“N-n-n-n-no way! No way, nuh-uh! Get it out! Get it out! I can’t get it out!”

In her struggles, her flustered hands pushed the foreign object as far as it could go up her nose. She was a maiden in bodily distress. Even Ryuuji couldn’t laugh at the extraordinary state of affairs.

“Oh, you idiot. You really are an idiot! Stop struggling! Stop! I’ll get it out right now!”

“Nnaaah!”

They were at school right before it let out. Luckily, there weren’t many eyes on them then. If someone witnessed them, it would have meant the instant and decisive death of their social standing. He held Taiga’s head, which turned bright red as she struggled and writhed with her entire body. With a shout of, “Heave ho!” Ryuuji finally pulled it out.

Shwoop! Taiga was released from the menthol attack on her sinuses, but she grasped her suffering nose and clung to the wall. Her legs were wobbly, and her long eyelashes were wet as though she were about to shed tears any minute. Taiga already had worse allergies than most, and the shock of the lip balm being applied directly to her nasal cavity might have been too strong for her.

“Taiga, keep it together. You did that to me first. Now that you’ve gotten a taste of your own medicine, you’ve got to stop doing strange things to me.”

Although he was giving her modest advice for her sake, Taiga turned to stare at Ryuuji with her large, teary eyes.

“It went deeper than it did with you, and my nose is smaller to begin with! My nose is different from your baggy, bottomless pit of a giant beak!”

He lost the strength to even make a comeback. “I see...” he said. As he was silent, Taiga continued in front of Ryuuji’s eyes.

“Guuh...m-my nose...is throbbing like crazy...”

“Don’t dig into your nose! That’s disgusting!”

She was probably bothered by her now wintry-fresh nostril. With behavior unbecoming of a girl, she used her finger to desperately scrape the back of her nose. He tried to do what he could to stop her.

“...”

Taiga suddenly stopped on her own. Ryuuji was gripping her uncapped lip balm right in front of her eyes. Taiga looked at the smooth and white lip balm, which had been extracted from two nostrils. It glistened innocently. She had a strange expression on her face as she continued holding the lip balm’s cap. She bit her lip and looked up at Ryuuji’s face.

Thinking that she wanted the lip balm back, Ryuuji pushed it into her small hand. But Taiga was still silent. She looked between the balm in her hand and Ryuuji’s nose several times. Then, as he was wondering what she would say, she spoke. “I-I think I’d need a lot of courage to put this on my lips again... I feel like I don’t need it anymore... Maybe I’ll throw it away...”

In that moment, a blue flash of light surged from Ryuuji’s sanpaku eyes. He hadn’t suddenly developed the ability to blast out a beam that would murder anything he looked at. He saw this as something for Taiga’s sake, for the environment’s sake, maybe even for the planet’s sake—a teachable moment!

“Don’t throw it out! *Mottainai*—it’s such a waste!”

Mottainai! Mottainai! That word passionately danced to a rhythm inside Ryuuji’s head. *Da dum dum dum, da dum dum dum, mottainai, mottainai, da dum da dum, mottainai!* “MOTTAINAI!” Ryuuji loved that beautiful Japanese word, which had made its way around the world. When he saw the vegetable remains that resulted from cooking—MOTTAINAI!—he would chop them up and stew them in soy sauce and sugar! When he found a blank slate on the back

of any flyers—MOTTAINAI!—he would make the flyers into a beautiful notepad! When he found anything that was meant to be disposable—MOTTAINAI! He would never use a plastic bag!

Ryuuji absolutely couldn't allow a practically new lip balm that had only been stuck up a couple of noses go to waste. He'd be selling his soul. As a human born on this planet, it was his responsibility during his one and only life.

But Taiga didn't understand it at all.

"But I absolutely don't want to use it. It definitely has stuff from your nose all over it."

She didn't understand the gravity of their mission and the responsibility that came with being born a human. *I need to teach her*, Ryuuji thought.

"It's okay, you idiot. All the stuff from my nose is already inside your nose. The stuff that's on the lip balm now is the same as the secretions in your own body." Ryuuji was slow and deliberate as he calmly told her the facts.

Pii! That moment, a scream like a whistle made its way out of Taiga's throat. Though it wouldn't make a difference now, she started to rub at her nose using her jacket sleeve.

"Your nose filth is in my nose... I-I feel irreversibly contaminated!"

"That's rude! You're the one who did it in the first place, weren't you?! Here, hurry and cap it again. Take responsibility for it and use it all up. You can just wipe it with a tissue."

"You think I can use this after wiping it with a tissue?! Then I'll give this to you, Ryuuji! How about that?!"

"It's fine! I don't need it! Men only use Mentam balm!"

"Why?! Weren't you just going on and on about 'mottainai'?! It should work for your lips, shouldn't it?! You're a weirdo with perverted tastes! You've got it in you, of course you do, Ryuuji, you MOTTAINAI community ambassador!"

No matter how *mottainai* it was, who would want lip balm that had gone into someone's nose (and two people's noses at that)? If the whole surface layer had been scraped away, it wasn't as though he wouldn't consider it, but this

hadn't been cleaned at all. It was just in its raw state, covered in snot. Ryuuji quickly turned away to refuse it.

“Don't be shy! Here, put it on! Your lips are always chapped, after all!”

“I don't need it! Wai...stop! L-Let go, that's gross...ah...it's kind of salty...”

Seriously, poor Takasu-kun...

“!”

The voice he just heard was even clearer than it had been before. There was no mistake; they must have said it after seeing the two of them in what would have appeared like a friendly encounter at first glance. In an attempt to rub the balm over Ryuuji's lips, Taiga had jumped at him from behind and had gotten a firm grip on his neck with one of her arms. Ryuuji was bending over backwards trying to avoid it, but Taiga smeared the balm on him anyway.

Where had it come from? Who had said it?

Once again, Ryuuji felt cursed. Wide-open sanpaku eyes blew blue-white fire as they searched for the voice's owner. In that interval, Taiga rubbed even more of the contaminated balm onto his lips, but he didn't care—she'd already gotten it on there once, so it was the same no matter how many more times it was put on.

The real problem at hand was that voice he just heard. Those words. Those whispering voices had continued to pursue him for several weeks now, at various times and in various locations around the school, sometimes even in the restrooms, sometimes while he was in the stairways going from one classroom to another, when he was throwing out the trash during cleaning, and now—when he was standing in the hallway after taking Taiga with him on an errand.

When they would see Ryuuji, they would shape their voice into a carrying whisper and say it. “Poor Takasu-kun.”

He ran so fast for the Palmtop Tiger during the Lucky Man race. In the end, that glasses guy from the student council stole her, but they still hang around

together like nothing's changed—even though he was dumped.

Even. Though. He. Was. Dumped.

“Daaaaamnnnnn itttt! Who’s spreading all these weird ruuuuumooooors?!”

In his frustration, Ryuuji pushed off Taiga, the little gremlin. He tore at his hair, bit his lip, and twisted around. Like the ill-omened plumed cockscomb that foretold a country’s doom, his eyes glinted indiscriminately at the other students.

Ryuuji had no idea that he made a first-year girl two hundred meters away faint as though she’d been targeted by the explosive force of an ICBM. Taiga didn’t know, either. She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head as though the situation were futile.

“By weird rumors, you mean *those* rumors, right? Right, right, I don’t like it. It’s totally something to worry about. The ones that have been going around have been so vulgar and groundless.”

Grin.

She was probably completely aware of the hateful smirk on her face. The smooth line of Taiga’s milk-white cheek turned a shade of rouge as she continued.

“Oh, right, how did they go again? Was it that I, the one who was chosen as Miss Festival, dumped you, Ryuuji, after you worked so hard at the Lucky Man race for me? And that in the end, I g-g-got together with Kitamura-kun... Was that it? I thought there might have been a rumor like that going around... Guess there must be... How terrible.”

As she quoted the content of the rumors, her happiness seemed to be heartfelt. She put on an even brighter grin. For a moment, Ryuuji felt the creeping suspicion that Taiga might in fact have been the source of the rumors, but he immediately dismissed the thought. It wasn’t as though an unrivaled klutz like Taiga was capable of spreading convenient rumors about herself around the school.

Indeed, the gossip came hot off the presses on the tail end of a large event, when there was nothing else going on at school. The groundless claims were

gaining speed among the bored students, crossing borders of class and grade level.

Of course, they weren't true. Taiga and Kitamura were not a thing, regardless of Taiga's wishes.

It was true that on the day of the culture festival, Taiga was pressed into dancing with Kitamura in front of the campfire during the after-hours festival. Ryuuji had seen it, too. It was an incredibly beautiful scene, but it had really only lasted a few minutes. The two immediately started rounding up Ryuuji, Minori, and even Ami to include them in the commotion they were making. It wasn't as though they had really gotten together. Nothing as juicy as that had happened.

Actually, what really got on Ryuuji's nerves wasn't that misunderstanding but the part that came before it. The "Takasu-kun tried so hard at the Lucky Man race but got dumped" part.

He just couldn't let that go. It was true that he had worked hard at the Lucky Man race. He had wanted to cheer Taiga up and, at the end of all the twists and turns, had ended up winning with Minori. And yet, far from making him seem manlier, the effort he had put into the race had created an even greater atmosphere of pity around him. With everything going on, it had mistakenly become an established fact around school that Taiga and Ryuuji were (previously) dating. That rumor had spread right under Ryuuji's nose without him even noticing. The finishing zinger was that Taiga dumped him. He was a loser who had been dumped and stolen from.

Just how did this happen? he thought. *When did this happen? Why?*

"Damn it... How can you be grinning like that? Aren't you annoyed?! They think we were dating!"

"Hmm, you're right..."

The Palmtop Tiger, the formidable berserker with an equally formidable name, who did whatever she wanted whenever she wanted, remained calm with a faint smile.

"I feel pretty conflicted about being the ex of a dog...because *I'm* human. But

it looks like I'm the one who dumped you. What's important is the present. Everything with you was in the past, after all."

She snorted.

"But what a poor wretched thing you really are. It's pretty pitiful that you've been dumped by me. You wouldn't want other people knowing. And you worked so hard for me. Kitamura-kun just stole my heart away... Puh puh puh!"

She was snickering. As though trying to say, *I can't even*, she glanced at Ryuuji out of the corner of her eye. *How pitiful*, she groaned from the back of her throat.

"Taiga...why you..."

"Now, look, don't say anything hasty. Let's hurry up and go. That old maid spinster-face is going to start her singles-only homeroom soon. We need to finish up and get back before she starts. Kya kya kya!"

You're abominable! thought Ryuuji.

Taiga turned around and jauntily walked ahead of him. After getting to this point, he was so, so frustrated he couldn't stand it any longer. Taiga would probably grin at that, too. Who wouldn't be on cloud nine if rumor had it they were dating their unrequited love? On the flip side, Ryuuji had to deal with being bestowed the title of "number one dumpee in school." He might have felt better being the super scary delinquent. It was better than strangers pitying him and pointing him out. *"Oh, it's Takasu-kun, that guy who was dumped and brushed off. How sad."*

He glared at Taiga, who walked with a skip in her step. Ryuuji's frustration grew. Hatred couldn't kill a person, but he could at least poke the top of her defenseless little head. *How about I do that*, he thought as he stifled his footsteps and snuck up to close the distance between them, but in that moment...

"Oh! Look, look, there's the photo panel! I got lucky! No one's here! I can choose whichever ones I want!" Taiga turned around with sharp instincts befitting a wild animal. Ryuuji pulled back his hand in a panic.

"R-right!"

“Let’s go, let’s go! Hurry up!”

Though he was reluctant, his frustration at Taiga fizzled in a second as she rushed over. Before he even realized it, he could only give a strained grin and shrug his shoulders as he usually did at Taiga’s antics. He couldn’t help it when Taiga’s little legs were working hard, exactly like a child’s, as she happily ran over the photos.

Well...I guess it’s fine. Just for now.

With all those emotions and the grin he couldn’t suppress, he felt fluttery, or like he was melting. The air around him seemed to become warmer and kinder as it filled his lungs. In the end, this was what became of Ryuuji’s frustrations. He’d melt into a sweet mess like an undercooked omelet and end up thinking, *Well, it’s fine*. In the end, he was helpless. It seemed he was created to be good and sweet to others. Though it was pitiful of him, he couldn’t help it. As usual, when he saw Taiga like this, stubborn and arrogant as she was, he couldn’t help but be happy.

That time...

That time when he had gotten the message from Taiga’s father, when he saw Taiga’s face as she realized what had happened, he thought that it would be impossible for them to return to these normal days.

Everything’s broken, and it’s all over. That was all he could think back then, and he had actually been scared. Then, he had been sad.

But, in the end, the world kept moving that day, just as it always had. The earth continued to turn, and day and night came just as usual. And Taiga’s feet pattered as she ran, just as usual.

Ryuuji rubbed at his breezy nose and started following Taiga. *Right*, he thought. Despite everything that had happened *that* day, Taiga was tough; it hadn’t left a mark on her heart. *You see that?* Ryuuji thought to no one. Taiga hadn’t changed a bit. The Palmtop-sized tiger queen couldn’t be brought down by anyone. Not even her own father.

“Hurry up and get over here, you loaf! Ryuuji, come!”

“ ... ”

Like a dog, she called him by clicking her tongue. Whether he could come without being sullen was an entirely different matter.

They had promised to do it after the school event.

“Uhhh...oh! I found Kitamura-kun! Ryuuji, look at this! Right?”

“That’s small...and he’s not even looking into the camera. Are you sure about this one?”

“It’s fine. I’m buying all the ones with Kitamura-kun in them. Number fifty-three and...hee hee, that makes four.”

The rows of photos had been taken by the photography club. They had put up a panel in front of the clubroom with numbered photos. Incidentally, the club had been demolished the year before by an unforeseen attack. From that year on, the club had girls only. Though there were few who knew the real reason, rumor had it the attack had to do with a black market in buying and selling girls’ swimsuit photos.

The students could buy one photo for ten yen from the new girls’ photography club. They would be able to check out photos until a certain day and could write down the numbers of the ones they wanted printed. They simply had to drop off an envelope that included their class, an optional keyword, and the money into a postbox set up in front of the clubroom. Several days later, the pictures would be delivered to the class.

The point was they had made a system where students could buy photos without anyone knowing who bought them. Of course, girls and boys in the throes of puberty wouldn’t just openly buy the photos they were in, like honest fools.

“Oh, Ryuuji, over here! Minorin is in this one.”

“Oh, where?! She’s in her bald cap! But I can’t not buy it.”

In small writing, Taiga and Ryuuji each noted the numbers for the photos of Kitamura and Minori on their own sheets. Just like the majority of the other students, they could lawfully procure pictures of their crushes. No matter how

widespread digital cameras and cell phones had become among students, this custom wouldn't die out for a while.

The photos lined up on the panel were, of course, of the culture festival. They depicted smiling underclassmen boys putting up decorations together in front of a classroom, maids advertising for the cafés, a couple putting up their hands in peace signs, and the stone-faced ensemble club as they performed. The scene of students talking amongst each other as they wore Greek-looking clothes was probably from a performance put on by the theater club. The students consulting each other in a corner of the hallway were the festival committee. The ones holding speakers in their arms were from the student council as they stood on guard.

On the next panel, they had gathered the pictures from the class exhibitions and had several snapshots of the Miss Festival contestants. There was even Taiga in her angel wings doing her Yazawa-esque shout. There was Haruta dancing as he held the championship cup. Next to him, there was a happy Ami in her good girl mask with her dangerous mouth wide open in a laugh. They had a photo of the faces of the competitors in the Lucky Man race as they lined up before it started (the photography club had probably hidden Ryuuji's face behind the other contenders' heads on purpose). As though it were the natural and obvious way to do things, the photos where Ami looked like a queen and cracked her whip were on a panel of their own in an established corner, standing out prominently in the hallway of the wholesome public school.

The pictures captured the various smiles and scenes from the festival in different perspectives and recreated that day in its own miniature 2D world.

"They sure took a lot," said Ryuuji.

"They said they were taking pictures of every student, no matter how bad. Actually, what's with this Dimhuahua corner? It's gross. I'm also in a lot of these. But I don't need a picture of myself... Should I buy this Miss Festival one?"

"Buy it for the memories. I'm going to buy it and show Yasuko though."

"If you're buying it, then I don't need to. MOTTAINAIIII."

"You're stingy when it comes to this?"

“Lip Balm: 500 yen. Photos: 10 yen.”

“Memories: Priceless...”

As he looked at the top of Taiga’s head while she crouched to check on the photos near the bottom, Ryuuji sniffled his menthol-permeated nose.

Even though it had happened just a few weeks ago, the scenes contained in the photos seemed strangely nostalgic. There had been a lot of difficult situations that had come up during the pro wrestling class exhibition, Taiga’s Miss Festival contest, and the Lucky Man Race. But it had been fun. That thought, and the thought that it had ended, made him feel sentimental for a few moments. Ryuuji’s drafty nostrils grew even chillier. The days had been packed with too much to do. He’d gotten into a fight with Minori, hadn’t he? So many things had happened—good things, things that hurt his heart, things that had made him think. As the sentimentality made his sanpaku eyes waver, they spotted a picture and halted.

“Right, Taiga! This one!”

When she was called, Taiga looked, and her eyes went wide. She stopped breathing, and her shoulders started quivering.

It was from the night of the festival, in the sparks as the stars fell.

In the photo, which was only a few centimeters long on each side, was the tiara-wearing angel and the vice president of the student council, holding each other’s hands and smiling in front of the campfire. The outline of their profiles was lit by the fire and, just as the rumors claimed, the two were gazing at each other like a real couple.

Ryuuji put exactly what he thought into words.

“It’s kind of...amazing. It’s a good picture.”

Taiga didn’t answer.

While not answering, she looked at that single photo. Finally, a faint smile appeared on her lips. Though Ryuuji was close enough to smell her hair, he couldn’t tell what Taiga was thinking. What he did know was the calmness of her gaze the moment she pulled down the photo and the whiteness of her

fingertips as she reached out to inspect it.

Taiga finally nodded and wrote down the number, and then unexpectedly turned away.

“Upuh!”

She had been holding her breath.

“Puh...kyaa kyaa kyaa kyaa kyaa kyaa! Ahyaa hyaa hyaa kya kya kya kya! I can’t hold it back anymore! What is this?! One of those shrine talismans with the scary faces?!”

“Huh?”

The romance was blasted away all at once. Like an endlessly firing machine gun, she laughed jubilantly in a way that would have blown away anyone around her as she pointed at the next picture. He looked, wondering what in the world it could be.

“Th-that’s terrible!”

“Yeah, it’s terrible! Really, what’s with that face?! Were you joking around?!”

“I wasn’t! You’re the terrible one!”

He staggered as he held his head. It was too horrible—to laugh at this. Taiga was too horrible. The picture Taiga pointed to as she laughed out loud was of right before the after-hours festival. Ryuuji was at the dead center of it, head to head with Minori in the Lucky Man race.

The face in the picture really was terrible. That was true. His already villainous face was wrenched out of shape from running at full speed while out of breath. His face would have sent a demon running the other way barefooted. It was like a scene from a jump scare. He looked exactly like a wraith that was going after Minori to kill her. Even he couldn’t help but feel like the photography club had outdone itself in displaying it.

But he’d been desperate at the time. He didn’t have the time to think about his face. He just wanted to cheer Taiga up and got completely caught up in running.

“Wh-who do you think I entered the Lucky Man race for? Why do you think I

made that face?! I did all that for you.”

“Thank you so much—”

Taiga’s fingertips wiggled to the right and left side of her face.

“I ’preciate it—”

She used her fingers to pull her bottom eyelids down.

“Kay!”

She stuck out her tongue. Then she turned herself around and went to look at the back of the panel.

“...”

Left behind, Ryuuji was so dumbfounded he lost the ability to speak.

Where in the world would someone need to go to learn that—to learn how to carve out someone’s heart in just three motions? Ryuuji sank down right where he was. Did he even have a comeback? *Muda, muda, muda, muda, muda. Reason won’t get through to her.*

“Ora, ora, ora, ora, ora, ora ora, ora, ora, ora ora, ora, ora, ora ora, ora, ora, ora ora, ora ora, oraaaa!”

“Huh?!”

Ryuuji instinctually jumped back at the sudden and aggressive battle cry that rang out from beside him. “Whoa...”

“Ora, ora, ora...wah?! Takasu-kun, why are you sitting there?! Huh... Was it because of my ora ora-ing?!”

“N-no, no! I just had a lot going on in my head...”

The girl was slowly looking down at her own fist. He furiously waved his hand side to side, indicating it was okay. *Well, if that was the case, then we’re good,* she nodded gravely. The girl was Kushieda Minori.

Then, she smiled for him.

Ryuuji was in bliss.

He’d fallen in love with her when they were first years.

At the start of the second year, they had been in the same class. By the time spring ended, they had become friends. They went on a trip together in the summer, and he got the slightest glimpse into her mystery of a heart. In the fall, he was plagued by her expert eccentricity and the strange distance between them. They said terrible things and fought, but they also laughed together and made up under a starry night sky.

“You came to pick out pictures, too, Takasu-kun? What a coincidence.”

“Yeah.”

And now, they were at the beginning of winter.

“How do they look? Takasu-kun, are you getting a lot?”

“No, not really.”

“I see.”

She kept looking at the pictures, so he was facing her profile. As she talked to him, Minori started playfully swaying. The tips of her hair lightly brushed his shoulder a few times from where he sat beside her. Then Minori said something very quietly.

“Drunken Fist.”

Minori was that kind of girl. She was the recipient of Ryuuji’s long unrequited love. She was the simplest of people but more complex than anyone. She was a fragment of the sun, a mysterious creature born of radiant light. Coincidentally, when she was yelling “ora ora” earlier, that had simply been her vocalizing as she wrote down the numbers of the photos.

“Oh, Minoriiin!”

“Yup, Taigaaa!”

It seemed Taiga had heard her beloved tamer’s voice from behind the panel. Taiga lazily crouched, and her face appeared from below the panel as she bayed happily. Minori also crouched into the same pose. The two friends were consulting each other from down low as though they were straddling a Japanese-style traditional toilet. *What are they doing?* Ryuuji thought. He was taken aback, but they ignored his look.

“I found your picture, Minorin. Number eighty-one looks really cute.”

“Oh, four score and one, is it... I’ll remember that. Listen up, I have something I want to tell you, Taiga. You’ve got to check out nice and even 200. It’s got Ahmin in it—the word of the day is un-der-boob.”

“?! ”

Ryuuji bent over backwards. *Number 200?! Where is it?! It wasn’t as though he had an interest in Ami, but in what world was there a high school boy who wouldn’t look after being whispered that word?! Echo it, roar it, reach out to the world! All together now—“MOTTAINAI!”*

“I’m always surprised at what a perverted dog you are...”

“O-oh, w-well I...”

At Taiga’s cold voice, he came back to reality, stopped walking, and returned to his senses. Right, Minori was there. He couldn’t do something so unbecoming. In a fluster, he tried to regain his composure. He casually noted number 200 to get it printed. He had done it thinking he wouldn’t get found out, but Taiga got a clear view of him from below and let out a loud sigh from beyond the panel.

“Seriously. Sometimes I think that I’ll die of shock at how strong your lust is.”

“Hey, that’s going way too far.”

“If you’re interested in Dimhuahua’s underboob, I’ll tell you this. She has...six boobs! I saw it!”

“She does not.”

It was too easy a retort. Taiga seemed unhappy as she puffed up her cheeks. Then she roughly pushed back her hair, which was so long it seemed about to touch the ground.

“Aaah, this is lame. I can’t keep up with your lust, Ryuuji. I’m heading back early. You just keep aiming your spontaneous horniness at Dimhuahua’s tits. I kind of feel like going to the bathroom, anyway. I’m going back to the classroom after that.”

“You got nature’s call because of the way you were sitting...”

In the face of Ryuuji's nodding, she replied, "I don't humor the vulgar." Leaving with just those words, she heaved herself up. Taiga's face disappeared. He could now only see the socks covering her ankles.

"What? Taiga, you're going to the bathroom? If it would please you, would you like me to deliver you there?" Still planted where she was, Minori spoke as she watched Taiga, who didn't stop walking.

"No, I can take myself."

They could only see her slippers and ankles as she quickly walked away behind the panel and left them behind. Minori seemed lonely as she got up.

"What? She really left. But, Taiga infected me with something unthought of. That's pee-oh-oh-pee..."

P-O-O-P—he put together the letters of the alphabet in his mind and Ryuuji lost sight of what he was saying as he looked down at Minori's face. She noticed he was looking at her, and their gazes met for just a moment.

"Nooooooooo!"

Right then and there, Minori spun around like a top. She faced him again and, bam, her face was red.

"D-did I just say something super embarrassing?! It was totally unconscious, that's scary! Whooooaaa, how embarrassing! But I'll get past this with brute force! Let's do it, Takasu-kun! It's a duel of fate! Mwa ha ha ha haaa. This is gonna be amazing and cool. It's suddenly Kushieda's turn! Card draw!"

He didn't know why she was trying to gloss it over (and it was already too late, anyway), but with sudden, grandiose movements, she abruptly showed Ryuuji her paper. There were several numbers written on it.

"Huh..."

"Bam. ★ I'm sacrificing 90 yen and recalling nine pictures now! In addition, reverse card open! Quick magic: 'saw it just now' invocation! Just now, I caught a glimpse of twenty-five. I'll pay the cost of ten yen to recall this photo with the softball underclassmen! I'll turn it to defense position and end my turn! There, it's your turn Takasu-kun!"

“Uh, uh...”

“Look, if you’re not quick, it’ll always be my turn!”

“Huuuh?!”

“Seriously, you’re dull! No way, playing innocent! I’m asking you to ★ share ★ the pictures you bought! ★”

Fwish. She hit his shoulder with the hand holding her notes. He was a little happy, but he couldn’t show it on his face.

“Oh, is that it? That was kind of ridiculous... I really didn’t understand any of that.”

“Again with the jokes! Now, let me see? Which ones did you buy? Are you going to do the obvious class group photo attack position recall? Let me see, let me see.”

“Uhh, the ones I bought were—m-my turn.”

He began to show Minori his notes but then realized how dangerous the situation was. *Huh. Wait a second*, he thought, *I can’t show this to her*. He stopped moving as though he were suddenly petrified. *What am I doing, being like ehee hee, i-it’s mah turn?*

“Hm? What happened?”

“Oh, n-nothing...uhh.”

“How suspicious... Is there a problem with your deck? Will you let me just—”

“It’s fine!”

“Quite suspicious.”

Ryuuji gripped the paper in his damp hands and desperately hid it from Minori, who for some reason was ogling him, trying to get a look. If she saw he had only written down photos of Minori, his turn would end without him being able to do anything, and then he would explode (he didn’t know the rules). Casually, he tried to put the notes into his back pocket.

“Oh! What about that picture?!”

He pointed in an unrelated direction. Like a cat, with agile movements, he

tricked Minori into looking there.

“Whoa, have we finally got a ghost photograph?!”

He planned on ending his turn with a note-in-pocket-while-she’s-looking-away “Aren’t we running out of time?” combo, but Minori’s voice dwindled off in a way he hadn’t expected.

“Oh! This...this picture...”

The picture Ryuuji had coincidentally pointed at wasn’t a ghost picture, but Minori was still staring intently at it.

“There was even a photo of the race here.”

Standing shoulder to shoulder with Minori, Ryuuji also looked up at it.

It was a photo of the race but different from the wraith one that Taiga had laughed at him for. It was right before they had jumped into the tape at the finishing line. With a look of decisiveness, Ryuuji was jumping into the tape chest first. Minori was right next to him, grasping at thin air, and her face was wrenched with frustration as though she were about to cry. They were pushing aside the others pursuing them. Even according to the photo, Ryuuji and Minori had reached the goal at the same time. They grasped at each other’s hands and roughly pulled at each other’s tracksuit sleeves as hard as they could.

Both of their faces were really, truly terrible. He couldn’t forget the warmth of holding her hand—it must have been a once in a lifetime event. As time passed, no matter how boring an adult he became, he would be able to remember that warmth in his hand just as brilliantly. He at least knew that for sure.

“It’s my turn again.” Minori looked down and said unexpectedly. She took out her notes again and used a mechanical pencil to quickly add another number. Then, still not showing her face, she thoroughly folded up the note and continued in a quiet voice, “Um, so, um, Takasu-kun.”

After that, she took a breath.

“I’m going to buy this picture. Will you buy it with me in commemoration?”

He was paralyzed. The blood rushed in his ears.

“Y-yeah.”



Minori had asked him to buy it with her. To Ryuuji, her asking him to commemorate that moment was more precious than anything. If he wasn't at his boiling point by now, he couldn't have had blood in his body. He wouldn't have been a living boy with passion flowing in his veins.

"Yeah. I'll buy it. In commemoration."

Ryuuji answered desperately even as he had trouble getting his mouth to move. He continued to nod. He was so incredibly happy that his face felt like it was almost on fire. Minori was so dazzling as she started counting change she had pulled out of her pocket that he couldn't look at her.

"Okaaaay, please get to your seats. We're starting the end-of-day homeroom."

Sin-gle, creaked the teacher's platform as the thirty-year-old bachelorette (Koigakubo Yuri, the homeroom teacher) appeared.

One day of hard work was over. Although her chin looked a little oily, her face wasn't dull and her makeup held up. The bright smile she turned to her students was that of a proper homeroom teacher's. She had gotten a trim recently to refresh her look. Maybe it was because of that, but she looked absolutely stylish. She might have even lost some weight.

She didn't hide her figure with her clothes, either. She wore a slimming white jacket and a knee-length skirt that was properly fitted. The rose gold necklace that went well with her complexion bore a teardrop diamond that was feminine and modestly radiant. She wore an omega constellation watch on her delicate wrist. None of it was too gaudy for a teacher. The bachelorette was well on her way to leaving her simple appearance behind. After dashing into her thirties, the spinster had burned herself into ash, and her spirit had revived. Like a phoenix, she wouldn't rest. The hellfire of age bore down on her, but she'd taken flight at the same pace. If she stopped moving, it was likely she would simply die.

Naturally, the students weren't in a position to know what had happened to the bachelorette.

"Now, now, everyone, please get to your seats. Quiet down."

No matter how tenaciously the bachelorette fluttered, the healthy chatter of the second years wasn't something that could easily be interrupted. They were still wandering around and making a commotion, and half of them hadn't gotten to their seats.

"Get with the program, now."

Pop.

At the same time a vein popped on the bachelorette's forehead from anger... the classroom's time and space made an audible sound as it warped, *siiin-gle*.

"Ugh?!"

"My ears hurt..."

Several girls with weak ear canals suddenly held their heads and staggered.

"I said...get to your seats. Now. Go. I want to get out of school as soon as possible today. I got an introduction to someone. He's thirty-four. He's an associate professor at a college. He's a second son, but he apparently owns property. He just needs a wife now. His mother and father are both teachers, and they want his wife to be a teacher, too. On top of that, they're living with the first-born son. It's a miracle. This is a miracle. It's the object of a miracle. We messaged each other four times, and we get along better than I thought we would, so we're going to a movie together! After that, we're eating! After that, we'll see where the mood takes us! For today—for today, I'm...I'm I-I-I... fowwwwww!"

S-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-sin-sin-sin-sin-sin-sin-gle!

"What is with this pressure?!"

"I felt terror just now!"

At the miasma blasting from the teacher's platform, the bustling students of 2-C all went to their seats in two seconds flat. *I've got this. My guidance abilities are full on*, the bachelorette thought as she pulled down her curled hair, which

had been standing on end. She resumed her kind, homeroom teacher smile.

“Tch...”

However, the click of a tongue made the bachelorette freeze. It came from near the center of the classroom, along with a gaze that prickled like an overgrown thicket of brambly vines. Of course, the one glaring at the bachelorette with her face warped in anger was the Palmtop Tiger. The problem child in question, who had the name of a tiger, couldn't seem to help being angry about having to hurry because of the bachelorette's selfish reasons. Her eyes, which were large with envy, lit up bright. She ogled the bachelorette's lips, which might have been overdone with gloss.

“Uh...uhh...”

Normally, she would just be pushed into submission by now, but today the bachelorette's singleness was on a different level. *Sin-gle!* She closed her mouth and looked back at Taiga. She planted her strong six-centimeter heels to the earth... She held her ground in the classroom.

“I-I won't lose! I'm having a five-year reunion with my high school classmates next month... Even if I can't get engaged, I need to at least snag a boyfriend, or I can't go! Class rep, please give the command!”

But the voice that should have answered the bachelorette was missing.

Again?—someone in 2-C let a bewildered whisper slip. The bachelorette's singular eyebrows knitted together to make a single furrow. Of course, Ryuuji was among those who were confused. He turned his glinting psycho eyes to his friend, who had been out of it for a while. It wasn't that Ryuuji was so angry at the tardy reply that he'd threaten to slit his friend's throat so he'd never make a sound again—he was just worried.

“Class rep! Kitamura-kun! Heeey!”

“...Huh? Uhh...”

He was called on several times by the bachelorette. After a while, the class representative Kitamura Yuusaku opened his eyes from behind his glasses. His bangs were uneven and dry, he was sitting crooked, and his shoulders were stooped. Even when he stood, his actions seemed encumbered, and he

staggered.

“Stand. Bow. That was a good meal...”

No one was able to follow. Everyone watched in worry as Kitamura planted himself back down in his chair. Taiga also scowled and seemed forlorn as she turned to watch Kitamura’s vacant face. Taiga was worried about her burned out, unrequited love in her own way. She didn’t notice that there was a group watching her with disturbed eyes.

“Seriously, the Palmtop Tiger’s a girl to be reckoned with.”

“How can dating leave a guy that haggard? What could they be doing?”

That was the aforementioned rumor, though it was a bit embellished upon. What they were whispering to each other was that Kitamura didn’t just have ordinary burnout. Instead, what had happened was that Kitamura had been completely drained after he started dating the Palmtop Tiger and been coerced into being her plaything. Kitamura was on his last legs, and on top of that, Taiga seemed to be hanging out with Ryuuji as usual even though she was supposed to have dumped him. Common knowledge held that the two boys were supposedly at the cruel mercy of the terrifying female tiger. Even among the students who insisted on taking rumors to be the truth, these particular rumors only passed among those convinced of the most extreme exaggerations of what was going on (and it might have been better to just call them rubberneckers with an abnormal appetite for drama).

The students exchanged looks with different meanings in them in front of the teacher. The bachelorette forced a single smile on her face. She couldn’t be dilly-dallying in a place like this. She had thirty minutes left before the associate professor would be in front of the theater’s fountain, and she only had a month until the reunion, too. Her cousin’s kid would be in junior high in the next year, too. Then, in ten years, she would be forty.

“N-now! It seems like there’s a lot of stuff going on, but let’s all keep it upbeat!”

Still smiling, the bachelorette glanced at the now-useless former class representative, who was currently a corpse. The corpse, as ever, was absentmindedly looking out the window and not even paying attention. Though

the bachelorette was in a hurry, it wasn't as though she wasn't worried about the corpse.

She made her voice even louder and put a recovery charm on the corpse—or tried to, anyway.

“Tomorrow is Friday. It's the last weekday of this week, right?! And you're all just waiting for the break to start, right?! Right, the student council presidential election will also be starting! Right, Kitamura-kun?! You've got to bring your game and cheer up! You're the top runner for president next semester. Actually, you're the only one! Right!”

At the bachelorette's words, the classroom went into an uproar. *YEAH!* It wasn't as though they were excited for the election. To be frank, no one actually had any interest in the student council president election.

“Right, the election! It's another event!”

“So it's already that time of year. That was quick!”

“Well, the next president is obviously guaranteed to be Kitamura!”

Reading the atmosphere, everyone in 2-C applauded. The bachelorette also applauded. The class was getting riled up, though it seemed a little forced, “Yay! Yay!” They were doing it all for the corpse. If only there were another event, Kitamura the corpse would be cured of his burnout. He would burn for the battle that was the election and come back from the dead as the student council president.

At this point, Ryuuji was also applauding loudly and purposefully as he exchanged glances with Noto and Haruta.

“Hey, Kitamura, you've got this! We're also going to help you with campaigning, of course!”

“Yes! Let's get pumped up! Right, Kitamura!”

“Should we do pro wrestling again?! Do you want me to write a script?!”

Aha haa, Haruta's such an idiot, what good does that do for a campaign?

Huh, I'm not an idiot, I'm not, I'm really not!

You're an idiot.

Right, Kitamura, having someone like that supporting you would just mean trouble.

Right.

"...It..."

Someone who'd gotten swept away by the collective mood patted Kitamura's back. Something had come out of Kitamura's mouth.

"Hm? What, what is this? What's wrong, Kitamura?"

"...Qu..."

"Hmmm? What's wrong, class rep?"

I wonder what's going on, I can't hear anything, anyway, thought Koigakubo. Well then, let's finish closing formalities and finish up, right? Let's do that. The bachelorette smiled and tried to quickly give her selfish command.

BAM!

The corpse kicked away his chair and stood up.

The chair fell. The sound must have reached the floor below. At the sudden twist, everyone looked up at the corpse in bewilderment. The bachelorette's smile twitched and froze. Ryuuji, Noto, Haruta, and Taiga also froze. Even Ami stopped thoughtlessly polishing her nails and opened her eyes wide as she looked up at her childhood friend, back from the land of the dead. The whole class froze.

The next sound was the honest voice of Kitamura that they hadn't heard in so long.

"I'm not entering the presidential election... I'm quitting the council, too. I'm quitting. I'm quitting it all! All of it! I'm quitting, quitting, quitting, quitting, quitting! I-I-I'm..."

His voice crossed through the classroom, carrying unnecessarily far.

"I'm quitting it AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAALLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL!"

Chapter 2

“I wonder if Kitamura-kun will actually come to school today. You don’t think he’s going to take the day off...nuaahh.”

It was Friday morning, the day of the week when they were just waiting for the weekend.

Beneath the incredibly overcast sky, Taiga stuck her hands in her pockets and hunched her back. A cold wind that seemed to be pushing late autumn into the start of winter fluffed up her soft hair.

“What are you going ‘nuaahh’ about?”

“It’s cold. I feel like it just suddenly got cold today. I’m wearing a knit vest under my jacket, but that’s not even close to enough... Maybe I should bring out my coat soon.”

“You don’t need that yet, it’s only November. You just run cold.”

“You say that when you’re the only one all bundled up...ugh, I’m gonna die.”

“It’s too early for coats, but scarves are just right for the season.”

Ryuuji walked slightly behind Taiga. Even though it was premature, he had a scarf wrapped snugly around his neck. *It’s a matter of having the right information*, he thought. Ryuuji let his sanpaku eyes glint particularly cruelly. According to the morning weather report, that day would be very chilly. After seeing that report, he had wrapped himself right up in his scarf, which had been on standby since he’d laundered it several days earlier.

“If you start wearing a coat today, then you won’t have anything to wear when it’s actually winter. Kitamura hasn’t replied to my messages. I messaged him as soon as I woke up this morning, too.”

“Right.”

They trod on dry leaves as they walked their usual route to school, lined by the Zelkova trees.

After Ryuuji finished futilely checking his messages, he put his cell phone away in his pocket, took off his scarf, and put it around Taiga's neck from behind. Taiga stopped walking.

"Oof."

It wasn't that he'd found a good chance to strangle that impertinent Taiga and pretend she had frozen to death—it was hard to see the scene as anything else, but he did it gently, and wrapped it around her hair so that it didn't hurt. The men's scarf was too long for Taiga's petite body, and even when he wrapped it around three times and tied it, it still dragged down her back like a tail.

"Ugh, geh..."

"Wait a second, stop. We'll be in trouble if you get snagged up in a car... Okay, done."

He fixed up the dragging tail by tying it into a ball behind her neck and then patted the knot. Taking that as a signal, Taiga, who had been waiting pretty obediently, started to walk again. Then her pretty face seemed to soften and melt.

"Ahhh, it's warm... I feel like I'm coming back to life..."

She sounded like a granny slipping into a hot spring. Ryuuji's sharp, devilish eyes lit up with a triumphant look.

"It's cashmere. Yasuko took full advantage of her salary to get it for me two years ago as a Christmas present. Isn't it soft?"

"Oh, cashmere... So a rabbit sacrificed its life for this."

"No, it wouldn't be a rabbit. Maybe a goat?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a rabbit?"

"Well, it doesn't matter," Taiga said as she slipped the scarf that Ryuuji's body heat still clung to around her cheeks. It seemed she was content. She didn't mind the scarf getting tangled with her hair and messing it up. Like a cradled cat, she squinted defenselessly. *Mmmmm*, she said, sinking to the point that she couldn't help vocalizing her state of mind. Somehow, it seemed that she

had actually been cold, and the scarf was better than anything else.

On the other side of things, with his scarf stolen, Ryuuji braced his shoulders against his rapidly cooling neck. Now that his skin was exposed to the wind, he was suddenly cold. He pulled his jacket together and tried to grin and bear it. *It's not cold*, he thought, forcing his back muscles to stretch out.

"But I'm a little worried about Kitamura-kun...when it's so cold out. I wonder where he must have taken shelter for the night... I feel sorry for him."

"He didn't spend the night outside... He must have gone home."

They had no clue where Kitamura, the corpse, had gone after his bout of madness had caused him to run out of the classroom the day before. When they called his house it went to voicemail, and he wouldn't answer his phone, call them back, or answer their messages. Though the Kitamuras' phone would go to voicemail on a normal day, since they were a two-income family. Of course, Ryuuji wanted to think Kitamura hadn't stayed out, but...

Burying herself up to her nose in the scarf, Taiga went into thought. She knitted her eyebrows. *Hmm*.

"Since Kitamura-kun's so serious all the time, he must have let his stress build up without realizing and then suddenly exploded."

For Taiga, who had but three desires (Food: I'm hungry! Sleep: I'm sleepy! Love: I love Kitamura-kun!), and whose thoughts didn't have much depth, this was a rare, serious remark. Ryuuji nodded in agreement.

"The way that he deals with things," he said, "that was probably his way of protecting himself by letting off some steam. But now that I think of it, it wasn't such a great move for everyone else."

"Letting off some steam, huh? Doing that is important, isn't it? I should do it, too."

No, you already blow off plenty of steam all the time, he tried to interject, but he stopped himself. *Blowing off some steam*, Taiga muttered as she stuck her fist out into the air (in a jab and straight, one-two combination) with sudden, dreadful speed. Ryuuji couldn't hide the fear he felt as he backed away holding the bag that held both of their bento boxes to his chest like a girl. It might have

been fun if everyone lived as headstrong and as freely as Taiga in their own way, but...

“Oh, it’s Minorin! Thank goodness, I didn’t want to get left behind today.”

He noticed Minori waving her hands in the air at the intersection where they normally met, “Heey!” Taiga ran so fast she seemed like she was about to fly. She clung onto Minori’s arm and hung there.

“Good morning! It’s cold, isn’t it, Minori?! The world is already in winter!”

“Yeah! You’re heavy, Taiga! My arm feels like it’s going to break! Actually, is it that cold? You’re already wearing a scarf? That’s so weak. Hey, Takasu-kun. Morning to ya.”

I’m the actual weak one, he thought, not that he could tell her that. Ryuuji tried to hide his embarrassment behind a sullen face. He raised his hand and returned Minori’s full smile with a greeting. Even when it was a cold, dark morning like this, Minori’s smile was as bright as a midsummer sunflower in full bloom. As he was doing that, Minori slowly started sniffing.

“Oh? Taiga, your scarf smells like a boy. It smells like when my younger brother finishes getting ready in the bathroom...oh. Is this Takasu-kun’s? He lent it to you?”

What sharpness. Oh no. Minori found him out. He’d carelessly let his own kindheartedness be discovered. Ryuuji scratched his face in embarrassment.

“Ah, you found out,” he tried to say. “Guess I can’t help it.” He nodded, wearing a sheepish grin fit for an ogre.

“It was cold, so I forced it off of him.” Taiga stopped him by telling a slightly different version of reality. Ryuuji didn’t even have time to interject before Minori went along with it.

“What?! You can’t do that, Taiga. Takasu-kun will catch a cold! If you’re that cold, you can wrap my tracksuit pants around your neck! See, I just washed them!”

“It’s fine! I don’t want those! Why is it that I’m weak and Ryuuji would catch a cold?”

“Despite appearances, Takasu-kun is a delicate boy like Gilbert-kun...right? Isn't he? My little bird.”

I don't know who this Gil-whatever-kun is, thought Ryuuji. *Wait, actually, what do you mean by 'despite appearances?'* He pulled back the thoughts that came flooding to him and just shook his head.

“I'm not a little bird, and I'm not that cold. And she didn't take the scarf from me by force—”

“Keh, what're you pretending for? I used my brute strength to pry it right off of you. Wearing a scarf like that makes Ryuuji conceited, so I thought I'd wear it for you instead. Hmph! You should thank me!”

Taiga haughtily stuck up her chin and turned away. She still had her face half-buried in the scarf as she left Ryuuji and Minori behind and started jogging ahead of them as though she were trying to run away.

“Oh, hey! Why're you going ahead of us? Seriously, don't go thinking you're above us! Takasu-kun, are you sure you're not cold? You don't want to wear these?”

As she watched Taiga's back in exasperation, Minori pulled her tracksuit from her tote bag and showed a glimpse of it to him.

“Huh?! No, I'm fine! Don't worry about me!”

Of course, Ryuuji's soul hadn't reached a state of deliverance where he could traipse through the front gate wearing the tracksuit of the girl he liked (and the bottom half, no less) around his neck. It wasn't that he didn't have any interest in Minori's tracksuit. If anything, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that he was endlessly fascinated with it, but wrapping it around himself and going out into the world where eyes were upon him was absolutely impossible. It was impossible precisely *because* he was deeply interested in them.

“Are you sure? Then it's fine. Well, the one I'm really worried about is that Mr. Kitamura. Have you been in contact with him? I've been messaging and calling him since yesterday, but he hasn't replied at all.”

“I haven't gotten a response either. I want to think that he's at school, though...”

“Right...hmm. I don’t know what to do if he’s taken the day off. We already have the weekend off, and not seeing his face until Monday kind of has me worried.”

They started walking side by side, and their faint white breaths layered over each other. As the fog mixed, their worries ran idle and their despondency grew—the time spent alone together didn’t sweeten as Ryuuji had hoped.

Taiga, who walked ahead, waited at a red light. Though they walked slightly faster in order to catch up with her, Ryuuji and Minori didn’t run. Minori probably didn’t run because she knew they would catch up at the light. Ryuuji didn’t run because, even though their time together wasn’t as sweet as he’d hoped, he still wanted to stay by Minori’s side for a little bit longer. As much as Kitamura weighed heavy on his mind, he also wanted to spend time with her.

Minori’s eyebrows were knitted together.

“Hmm.”

She was probably thinking about Kitamura. She pulled out some lip balm from her pocket. *Hah*, Ryuuji stopped her as she tried to take the cap off.

“You can’t do that, Kushieda. Don’t put that on while you’re walking. You don’t know what could happen.”

“Wh-what?! You’re telling me what to do, you demon of a wife?! Nothing’ll happen! Nothing’s going to happen. Oh, I see, are you implying that I’m old?!”

“I’m not playing house with you. You might accidentally stick the thing right up your nose.”

“U-up my nose? No, that wouldn’t happen. You’ve even got me back to being serious. That would never happen—never. I would be surprised if it ever did.”

“It happens. Sometimes it happens. I’ll keep this until we get to school.”

“What?! My lips will get chapped! They’ll get flaky!”

“Sometimes there are things you need to protect more than the skin on your lips...”

“Woo. ♪ So you say. In that case, this is on me. Take it.”

Minori, (seemingly) worn down, tossed the lip balm into his open palm. He didn't want Minori to feel the misery of that sting in her nose. With that desire in mind, Ryuuji nodded gravely as he squirreled the lip balm away into his pocket. He wasn't thinking of sneakily putting it on his own lips while hiding in the toilet later at all. No, no, no, not at all.

"You girls really all do walk around with lip balm on you. Do you really need to apply it that regularly?"

It wasn't that he trying to cover up his desire—Ryuuji really did wonder about it when he asked her. It wasn't much to go on, but he didn't think there were any guys he knew who carried lip balm around with them every day.

"Yeah, because I want to use it. It's better to always have your lips glossy and silky soft. There's no reason for a girl's heart to wish for our lips to be glossy and soft, but we do. Even Taiga carries one around in her pocket."

"I know. It's the Nivea Water-In brand, isn't it?"

"How well you know! You know a lot about Taiga, don't you?"

"Yeah."

He couldn't tell her, *It's because I got it stuck up my nose*. Ryuuji's eyes went distant as he recalled the intense feeling of the menthol penetrating his nasal walls. *Aha ha, right*, Minori was saying. Her soft, distant laughter somehow erased the trauma of the menthol's attack.

"Right, I really do know... I regret not confiscating it before the accident..."

"Oh, an accident... W-wait, what?! You can't mean..."

In front of Minori's horrified gaze was Taiga, who had her face buried in her scarf and was looking intently up at the light. As she waited for the light to change from red to green, she gently stomped as though trying to snuff the life out of the cold that surrounded her. She was buried up to her nose in cashmere. She lightly shrugged her shoulders, stuck both her fists into her pockets, and even closed her eyes.

She was acting like a baby penguin enduring a blizzard and, despite himself, Ryuuji felt like laughing. Right when he was on the verge of bursting out, he

stopped himself.

“Is it really that cold?”

Once he caught up to her, he spoke to the whorl of hair on the top of her head. Her long, still closed eyelashes didn't move. Still in her baby penguin pose, she snuffled.

“It's cold,” Taiga replied, “but it's a little better when I do this.”

“Oh! You came just in time, Takasu-kun, over here! Come with me, hurry!”

“Huh?”

It happened the moment he stepped into school and started changing from shoes to slippers at the entrance. Suddenly, the familiar spinster of a homeroom teacher grabbed Ryuuji's arm. He didn't know what could have happened in one night, but Koigakubo Yuri, who had been so perfectly done up the day before, was barefaced, and her hair was held up in a shabby bun with a rubber band. She was in a tragic-looking tracksuit and her eyes were afflicted with old age.

“Uh, w-wait?! What's going on?! You kind of look like you've suddenly aged...”

“My age doesn't have anything to do with this! Hurry and come with me!”

The bachelorette completely ignored Minori and Taiga, who had come in with him, and started walking faster and faster while still holding onto Ryuuji's arm. He was stepping on the heels of his slippers, which still weren't fully on. The bachelorette had someone else captured in her other hand.

“Yo! Kawashima!”

“No waaay, Takasu-kun! Good morning! ♥ What are you thinking? This isn't the time to be exchanging greetings! No waaay, this is the worst! What is this? Did I do something wrong?! What is this?!”

“I've got no clue either!”

Ami had probably been caught as she came to school, just like him. She still had her bag over her shoulder as she too was pulled away. Her beautiful face was drawn in an intense scowl, and she couldn't bat off the bachelorette's hand as she was walked, or more accurately, *dragged* along.

"Who cares about you?! Why is someone as cute as me being taken away?!"

"Why would no one care about me?"

Taiga and Minori seemed unable to grasp the situation and could only watch with their mouths wide open as the two were being pulled away.

Cute Ami-chan and uncute Takasu-kun were forced up the stairs by the bachelorette, who was stronger than they thought and ignored all their questions. Then they learned the reason why they had been brought along.

It took several seconds to understand who it was when he raised his head. When they realized it...

"WHAT?!"

Ryuuji let his bag fall.

"Huh?! What?! Whaa..."

Ami opened her eyes wide.

"Aaaaaaaaha ha ha ha ha ha! What is that? What happened to yooooooooooooou~?!"

She clapped her hands together and laughed out loud. Ryuuji turned to stare at Ami without thinking—was this really the time to laugh? She might have noticed his look.

"Just kidding. ♥" She stuck out her tongue slightly, but it was already too late to be acting cute. Ami's inappropriate laughter lingered in the already gloomy atmosphere as they went into an uncomfortable, cold silence. It was awkward.

They had been taken into the interview room, which was known as the "lecture room" among the students.

The bachelorette quietly closed the door behind Ryuuji and Ami. There were

others beside the three of them in the locked room. There was a middle-aged, male guidance counselor infamous for his strict attitude. He sat in front of them. Next to him was someone they never would have expected. Her long, smooth hair flowed down her back.

“Patriar...wait, I mean Kanou-senpai...”

The person glanced at Ryuuji. It was the student president who had a strange intensity about her—Kanou Sumire.

Though she was a willowy, graceful, composed, and beautiful girl, the whole school considered her their patriarch for her big-hearted personality. Her name would likely endure in school history. It might have been obvious, but even in these strange circumstances, perfect big brother Kanou’s calm eyes were overpowering as she sat there with her arms imposingly folded.

And then there was the one who was looking up at the two from his sitting position on the ground.

Ryuuji shouldn’t have recognized that person. That was because the person’s head was straw yellow. On top of that, it was clear it had been bleached with cheap stuff at home, since it was dry and way too blond, as though it had been left on for longer than it should have been. Ryuuji didn’t know anyone who looked like that. At least, that was what he thought. Under those disordered bangs, he saw familiar silver-rimmed glasses, and then behind those was the handsome, intellectual face of someone he knew all too well.

“Ki-Kitamura, you...”

It was Kitamura’s face.

“Wh-what happened to your hair?! It’s against school rules...and...and...”

He didn’t know whether it was okay to ask or not, so he just did it.

“...”

He didn’t get a response. *You can tell just by looking*, the gaze that Kitamura looked up at Ryuuji with practically said.

Kitamura Yuusaku had become a delinquent.

His bright gold hair was an obstinate mess, and his mouth was tightly closed

at his friend's question. His eyes were kind of hardened and, if you looked closely, his glasses' frames were warped. His jacket hung open because the top two buttons were undone. His shoulders were dirty with sand, so much so that Ryuuji wouldn't imagine how he could have gotten that way unless someone had pinned him to the ground.

Ryuuji had no idea what had happened. Blue lightning danced in his psycho eyes. It wasn't that he was thinking, *You got your dues, you impertinent fool! I'll hang you in hellfire with a rope made from poisonous snakes and burn that golden head of yours!* He was just scared of learning what had happened to his straight-laced friend to make him like this.

"Oh, Takasu, Kawashima. What do you think of this hair?"

There wasn't much they could say.

Ryuuji was at a loss for a reply and glanced at Ami beside him. Ami remained silent as she fiddled with the tips of her beautifully manicured nails. Her face said this had nothing to do with her as she pretended to not hear the question. The guidance counselor continued in a humorless voice:

"This guy came to school with this head of hair and made quite the commotion in front of the school gate, right in front of a teacher. What do you think of that behavior? Do you know anything about it? He won't answer anything we ask, so I've called you as his close friend, Takasu, and you as his childhood friend, Kawashima. I've also called Kanou, who's watched over him like a big bro...big sister in the student council. Sorry for calling you in when you're busy, Kanou."

"I don't particularly mind, but I have no power here. I can't understand it, and he's already quit the student council. I don't have anything to do with him anymore."

He quit the student council? Kitamura did? Ryuuji almost asked without thinking, even though it wasn't the type of atmosphere where he could interject. But he remembered. Actually, in the confusion from the day before, Kitamura had said something like that.

The completely impeccable student council president gazed at the golden-haired, delinquent boy with a stone-cold, piercing stare. Kitamura wriggled as

though he were trying to avoid that gaze. He bit hard on his lip as he hid his face under his drooping bangs.

“Takasu, what do you think? Anything come to mind?”

“Well...uhh...kind of. Yesterday, he kind of said...uhh...”

He could say that Kitamura had been acting weird for a while and that everyone said it was burnout. He could say the burnout had resulted in an explosion the day before. Ryuuji didn’t know whether saying those things would help or hurt Kitamura. He wanted time to think, but he didn’t think that would happen.

He had no idea what to do. He looked imploringly over to the bachelorette. The bachelorette’s tired, gloomy eyes looked back at Ryuuji.

“I already told them about what happened yesterday.”

After he ran out of the classroom and she hadn’t been able to get in contact with the corpse, she probably ran around the streets trying to find him after school, and came in early that morning to wait and catch him as he came in. She probably privately gave up on the associate professor she had been looking forward to going out with.

The bachelorette couldn’t say that. She’d become decrepit in an instant.

“And you, Kawashima?”

“Uhh, I don’t know what to say... It’s like I can’t even understand it at all...”

Ami now turned her Chihuahua eyes and made them look cutely bewildered. Then she donned her legendary, explosively cute, goody-two-shoes iron mask.

“I didn’t think there was anyone who would act up so obviously. It like, pains me. It’s like you can’t really follow what they’re doing, and you just want to laugh about it all.”

Having distracted everyone, she contorted her lips into the picture of pettiness and steadily bombed her childhood friend with insults. She let her twisted, black-hearted nature show, and her teasing gaze was a bullet that pierced Kitamura and left its mark. *Ahh*. Ryuuji could only look up to the ceiling. That was right. When it came to it, a girl like Ami was a full-body bomb even

worse than Taiga.

Then, to show the extent of her ill-spiritedness, she took a step forward.

“Yuusaku, I don’t really care what you do, but don’t you think you’re living up to other people’s expectations a little too much? It’s like you’re crying for attention, begging for someone to worry about you. Like, ‘someone notice me—I’m suffering so much, look what a mess I am~!’ Is that what you’re trying to say? Ahhh, but seeing you like that is making me feel embarrassed. Actually, acting up and bleaching your whole freaking head when you’re a second year in high school is already painful enough to look at. You should have finished doing that stuff when you were a second year in junior high or when you’re a salary man pushing fifty and trying to hide gray hairs. Actually, see-ree-ahs-ly, what’s going on with that head of yours? Did you do it yourself? Sorry, but this is coming from the heart—It. Seriously. Doesn’t. Suit. You!”

Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. ★ Kitamura’s childhood friend pointed at him and held her stomach as she burst out laughing again. Her body was wracked with genuine laughter; the only thing missing were tears. She didn’t have a shred of kindness or worry for him. She didn’t have a shred of restraint or reserve. The rude words Ami spat even painfully pierced Ryuuji’s chest where he listened from the sidelines. He almost instinctually jumped in front of Kitamura to protect his friend from her sharpness. But he couldn’t, and Kitamura, who had been cruelly attacked by his childhood friend, obstinately looked away and bit his lip.



Whew. The bachelorette let out a tired sigh. She rubbed her dull and dry, makeup-free panda eyes and gently put her hands on Ryuuji and Ami's backs.

"Could you go back to the classroom ahead of me? Sorry, and thank you. I'll come after I talk to Kitamura-kun a little more. I had the assistant homeroom teacher take care of the classroom. Please don't tell the others in the class what happened. Do you understand? If I can, I want to bring Kitamura-kun back to class as though nothing had happened."

"Okay... We understand."

As though to speak over Ryuuji's obedient agreement, Kanou Sumire's low voice seemed to have a biting ring to it as it came out of her mouth:

"I think it would be best if you came back, too, Koigakubo-sensei."

She stood up, slight and thin. Her beautiful eyes clearly lit up as she glared down at Kitamura, who was still sitting with his legs folded beneath him. Her gaze lacked human warmth. She stood with impeccable posture. Ryuuji could only see her as an android who had surpassed humanity, lacking weaknesses of any kind.

"Even humoring this huge idiot is a waste of time. It seems like he doesn't intend to open up, so all we can do is leave him be. According to the school rules, 'Hair unbecoming of a student is prohibited.' This is obviously a violation of that rule. Until he fixes his hair, he can't attend school. I think that is fitting."

"Kanou-san, you can go back now, too. I'm going to stay here for a little longer to speak with Kitamura-kun. Thank you for coming."

The bachelorette slowly shook her head, and as though to protect Kitamura, took him by the shoulder to stand him up. She brought a chair over to have him sit, keeping him between her and the guidance counselor. Her movements more than adequately said "I'm not going soft on him." Once she saw that, Sumire's eyes fluttered and traced an elegant path away from Kitamura.

With that, it was clear their work there was done. Following Sumire, who had bowed and stood up, Ryuuji and Ami also bowed. They could only reluctantly leave Kitamura, still with his head down, in the interview room.

The other classes had probably long since started homeroom. The hallway had gone quiet, and there was no sign of anyone.

Ryuuji gave Sumire a quick, haphazard bow and tried to head to the classroom.

“Senpaaai?”

Ami’s voice rang sickly-sweet through the unnaturally quiet hallway. Sumire turned to face Ami straight on, with Ryuuji at the side. Even Ryuuji understood her challenge. Ami purposefully put on her cute and poisonous goody-two-shoes smile. For some reason, it seemed she was trying to taunt Sumire. *Hey hey hey*, Ryuuji thought. He was scared. She, of course, left him in the lurch.

“Kanou-senpai, aren’t you being incredibly cold to Yuusaku? Ahh, poor Yuusaku. Even though he was so lovey dovey with you, senpai. I don’t think you ever were that cold to Yuusaku before. Did something maybe happen between you and Yuusaku recently? Maybe, even though no one would have ever expected it, you’re the reason why Yuusaku is acting up?”

“Who knows...”

She acted as anyone would have expected. With a slight smile like a man’s, which only reached the corners of her mouth, Sumire refused Ami’s bait. She simply turned her back to them again and made to leave. Without thinking, Ryuuji yelled at her back. “S-sorry! Kawashima was kind of rude...but she just has a really caustic personality.”

That’s a terrible thing of you to say! He interrupted Ami even as she protested and apologized. As though it were nothing, Sumire lightly raised her eyebrows.

“It’s all right. So she’s caustic. Why’s that a bad thing? Even if it doesn’t amount to much, I think everything Kawashima just said about Kitamura is right. I had no idea Kitamura had such a good childhood friend. You can come to me if you ever need anything.”

“Yes. Um...senpai, if anything comes to mind, then...”

“You want me to tell you? Well, actually, there is something.”

In surprise, Ryuuji popped up his head, which had been lowered in a bow to send her off. Next to him, Ami, whose head he had been holding down, completely stopped struggling. The impeccably flawless student president slowly compared Ryuuji and Ami with quiet eyes. She took her time shrugging her shoulders.

“There are things I know, but if it is what I think it is, I think I’d be even more disappointed in Kitamura.”

She had an expression that wasn’t quite a smile or a scowl. Then, with just that and a, “Well, then,” she turned her back to them and made her way towards the third-year classrooms. She walked with steady, wide strides, like a man.

Something that would disappoint Kanou Sumire even more—Ryuuji searched his brain with those keywords as he watched Sumire’s retreating back.

“What was that? She’s just a cold-blooded girl putting on airs as though she’s better than everyone else. What a teeerrible impression.”

As she combed through her straight hair with her fingers, Ami spoke louder than necessary in the quiet school. Ryuuji turned around in a fluster and glared at Ami.

“Y-you idiot! Someone definitely just heard that!”

But it was already too late. Ami snorted.

“I don’t mind if anyone heard. It’s true anyway. That girl is definitely the cause of this, and she’s turning a blind eye to it. She just gives a hint about it and up and leaves. ‘Actually there is.’ She didn’t tell us anything in the end. She’s the same as Yuusaku right now. If she phrases it like that, someone will want to know more, and she’s thinking someone will put in the effort to figure it out. She’s making too many assumptions. It’s like she thinks she’s the center of the universe or something.”

Unable to hide her irritation, Ami’s cold eyes were beautiful, like clear hazel blown glass. The words she spat out were prickly in a way that made him want her to put her ironclad good girl mask back on.

“What horrible things come out of your mouth.”

Just saying that took all his strength. He wanted to hold his head and crouch down. Kitamura was acting like that, and the student president was the way she was, and Ami was acting like this. Ryuuji just couldn't process it all anymore.

"It just gets me all riled up," she said.

"What are you saying?! You were the only one who made a bad impression! What was that in the first place? You're talking as though it were all Kanou Sumire's fault."

Ami turned around, making a cute face, but still seemed to have no intention of sparing anyone.

"Huh? Takasu-kun, how do you not get it? Of course it's her fault. There's no way anyone other than the student president could be responsible for Yuusaku becoming weird like that. And also, from the way that girl talked—hmph, he probably confessed to her and got rejected. Ahhh, this is laaame. God, please give back the precious time that I've lost."

"C-confessed?! Of course he didn't do that! Why would you assume that?!"

Ami turned and pulled ahead of Ryuuji. She purposefully sighed loudly. Her shoulders heaved and slumped to show him her mood.

"Now, Takasu-kun, it's not that I hate that you're always slow to pick up on important things, but don't you think that's going to prove to be a fatal flaw someday?"

"Hey..."

What are you saying? Ryuuji thought. He would lose the argument if he said it, so he didn't. Around this place, there was a cannon and a cannonball called Taiga. Ryuuji wished he could shoot it at Ami to really show her how he felt. Ami's assumptions were just foolish and petty.

Right. Girls always made things out to be about love, no matter what it was. Girls were always frivolous like that.

It was true that Kitamura sincerely idolized Kanou, the patriarch. Ryuuji knew that Kitamura's life had been all about his student council activities since they were first years. Ryuuji also knew Kitamura had taken it on himself to being her

cheerleader. *She's the best, most respectable president there ever was!* He was a club captain and a class representative, among many other things, but no matter how busy he was, Kitamura would happily prioritize any task for the student council, on any day, without so much as a word of complaint. Ryuuji knew Kitamura had put his all into it. As someone who had been Kitamura's friend since they were first years, Ryuuji knew this better than anyone; he'd seen it up close.

At the core of that passion was Kitamura's feelings for the perfect Kanou Sumire. Even Ryuuji somehow knew that. He also knew that Kanou Sumire had a charm that no one could hold a match to. She was excellent and flawless. Kanou Sumire was practically a superhuman, and anyone who encountered her couldn't help but admire her, adore her, and have their heart stolen by her. It wasn't difficult to imagine that the intensity and power of those feelings would have been even stronger in Kitamura, who was with her in the student council on a daily basis.

In the end, even if Kitamura had those feelings for an upperclassman, they were just adoration and respect for someone in a position higher than him. It didn't have anything to do with them being the opposite sex. It wouldn't have been strange for a man to passionately admire another man who occupied a position you aspired to have.

There were probably more people like Ami, who would chalk anything up to love. It was silly and shallow. Kitamura wasn't the kind of person to fall in love. Right. Kitamura was higher than that—one would describe what he had as aspiration. Kitamura was devoted to his excellent leader and was expressing his sincere admiration. That had to be it. Everyone at school revered the impeccable student president like an older brother, after all.

As Ryuuji was thinking that, it suddenly hit him. For a second his blood froze over.

Kitamura was saying that he would go as far as quitting his student council duties, even though they had been so precious to him. The situation was probably much, much worse than Ryuuji had imagined it to be.

“Huh?! Hey, isn’t that Kitamura?!”

That was the first thing that came out of the mouth of someone sitting in a window seat.

The assistant teacher had started the morning homeroom. The incident happened right when they finished taking attendance. A commotion started to envelop class 2-C.

The whole class stood up all at once, not listening to the assistant teacher’s chiding as they lined up at the window to look down. Taiga, who somehow hadn’t become a cannonball, was desperately latched onto the back of someone in front of her and grabbing their hair to get above their head. She looked at the scene.

I’ve had enough! I’m going home!

Don’t go home, you idiot!

C-c-c-calm down! Anyway, let’s cool off!

The argument between the three unfolded at the stairs of the entryway. The participants in the stormy exchange included the bachelorette (age 30), the middle-aged guidance counselor, and...

“H-he’s blond?! What’s with his hair?!”

“No way! It really is Maruo!”

“That can’t be true! Kitamura’s gone delinquent!”

“Hey, get back to your seats! Don’t look outside! Look, I’m serious! Sit down!”

One by one they were dragged away from the window by their collars, while Taiga remained preoccupied with the scene below. Someone was dashing to the school gate now. The teachers grabbed him by the collar, and the button on his school jacket popped off, followed by the button of his long-sleeved shirt. Even though he was stripped almost half-naked, he didn’t know when to give up. He flailed his hands and feet, still trying to get out of the teacher’s grip. That someone was unmistakably Kitamura.

Though his hair was bleached past recognition, it was definitely Kitamura Yuusaku.

“Everyone, get back to your seats quietly now—AHH...”

Taiga didn't even realize what she was doing as she gave the rookie male teacher a sharp, reflexive elbow in the gut. She held her breath. A single question rushed from her throat, *Why?*

In the end, Kitamura had been pulled back into school and confined to the interview room again.

“Yuri-chan's English class and morning classes are all self-study, so they've probably been cross-examining him this whole time.”

Noto, the source of the information, took his fork. He seemed sincerely worried. His eyes blinked behind his black-framed glasses as he squeezed ketchup over what seemed to be a microwavable chicken nugget.

They should have been enjoying a nice afternoon break. Instead, the three of them had dark expressions on their faces. Noto and Ryuuji had spread their bento onto a desk and were sitting across from each other alongside Taiga, who had set up camp on the edge. For Ryuuji, however, the situation had gone past dark into scary.

“I want to bring Kitamura-kun back to class as though nothing had happened.”

The bachelorette's thoughtfulness had been for nothing. It was already a well-known fact in the class that Kitamura had come to school with blond hair. Despite that, Ryuuji wanted to do what he could to make sure the details didn't get around for Kitamura's sake. That was what he was hoping, but he didn't know if it would have any results.

“I wonder if they're punishing him by calling his parents. Actually, where's Haruta in a time like this?” As he nibbled on a nugget, Noto put his head in his hand. He didn't seem to be enjoying his food at all.

“He's probably buying bread or something from the school store. Kitamura's

parents both work, so I don't think they would call them here all the way from their jobs... Actually, shouldn't his parents have realized something was up the moment he bleached his hair? Taiga, mayo?"

"Ngh."

You're really mothering her, Noto muttered as Ryuuji squeezed mayonnaise over Taiga's chicken nanban in front of his eyes. Ryuuji also squeezed some on his own, and in order to keep Taiga from sticking her elbow in it or getting it on her sleeves, he automatically made quick work of cleaning up the empty mayonnaise packets. He even collected Noto's ketchup packets. *Thanks, thanks*. Noto gave Ryuuji a slight wave with his fork.

"But, seriously, what a shock. I wonder what got into Kitamura. He ignored all my messages. I feel kind of left out."

"Yeah, and I can't believe he suddenly went blond."

"Yeah, that wasn't...oh."

Right then, one of Noto's cold nuggets was replaced by a piece of Ryuuji's homemade chicken nanban. Most of Ryuuji's heart was dedicated to Kitamura, but his psychotic eyes, which seemed to blow blue fire as they glinted, were taken over by his friend's freezer-meal bento for a moment. There was no hesitancy in his chopstick's movements as he traded the dishes.

"Thanks, I was just thinking that looked good."

"Help yourself. It's not all that great though."

"It is that great, Takasu. You're seriously great at cooking. Huh?"

"Ugh..."

Taiga turned a sad gaze on Noto and groaned.

"Oh, d-did you want some? That's fine, if you're okay with cold stuff. They're my mom's favorite when she feels like cutting corners."

Once he noticed her expression, Noto put a nugget on the lid of Taiga's bento. It seemed he didn't intend to comment on Ryuuji and Taiga's identical bento. Taiga slowly placed a bacon-wrapped asparagus that Ryuuji had made on top of Noto's meal. She still didn't say anything, but her eyes said it all. *We traded...*

Yeah, it's a trade... It was the first time she and Noto had shared a human-like cultural interaction.

“Haah...”

“Urgh...”

Then the moment was overshadowed when they both sighed simultaneously. Taiga and Noto couldn't help but be worried about Kitamura, too.

The changes in Kitamura's behavior hadn't simply been the result of burnout. That was what Ryuuji now thought. If he noticed Kitamura was being strange earlier, he might have been able to do something about it before it had reached the teachers. Now he was too late on all fronts, and Kitamura had gone delinquent. He was sure if it were the other way around, Kitamura would have noticed immediately. Kitamura would have been persistent about figuring out what had happened.

What kind of friend am I? he thought.

“Take that! Get walkin', ya disgrace of a samurai! My magistrate, I've brought in a crook!”

His shoulders, which had been slumped dejectedly, jolted up.

“You're terrible! Why're you saying that in an accent?! I'm not even from Hokkaido!”

“You imbecile! Apologize until blood pours from the throats of every person born and raised in Hokkaido! Take that! Give yourself up to Jyun, Hotaru, and the Northern fox! It's like ‘From the Northern Country’ got a 2007 reboot. ‘But the kids are still eating!’”

BASH!

The private detective who had suddenly appeared before them had the crook by the nose. The classroom was instantaneously turned into the scene of an Edo-era courthouse. The peasant was thrown to the floor at Ryuuji, Noto, and Taiga's feet.

“Noto, Taka-chan, help me! Kushieda is terrible! I haven't done anything wrong! I haven't burned down my dad's log cabin or anything!”

“Make your excuses in the afterlife, capiche?”

“Kah-what? I don’t know what that means! Your gags always go over my head!”

The crook was Haruta, the long-haired, disheveled, airheaded idiot, and the private detective holding him to keep him from escaping was Minori.

“H-Haruta, what did you do?!”

“Um, Kushieda, at least stop stepping on him...and who’s supposed to be the magistrate, anyway?”

“Everyone has a magistrate in their hearts! Each and every person has their own precious magistrate in their heart!”

As the two boys helped up their friend, who was close to tears, and automatically defended him, they opened up a seat and offered it to the demonic private eye. *Blam*. Minori sat. She thrust Haruta’s chin up to encourage an explanation out of him.

Haruta sniffled as he spoke.

“I really didn’t do anything. I just got a phone call from Kitamura last night. And I was like, ‘Oh, it’s you Kitamura, what’s up with you today?’ and Kitamura was like, ‘I’m not up to anything, sorry for taking you by surprise.’ And then suddenly he was like, ‘You had rad blond hair this summer. How’d you do that? Haruta-chan, that was super bangin’. You gotta teach me your ways.’ So I told him that I bought this super strong bleach at this one place, and put on three times the recommended amount, and then I wrapped my head in tin foil and put a dryer to it and ended up with spick-and-span blond! That’s all I did~!”

Ryuuji thought for a bit.

“I feel like you’ve really embellished what Kitamura sounds like in your head.”

Wait, this isn’t the time or the place for that. This time, he pressed Haruta with an expression exactly like that of a wounded Tasmanian devil.

“Why didn’t you ask him why he needed to know that stuff?!”

“Eek! Your face is terrifying!”

Noto immediately joined Ryuuji with a matching glare at Haruta.

“Yeah, that’s right! Yesterday, Takasu and I were trying to get hold of Kitamura all day, and we were super worried! How were you having a casual conversation with him?!”

“But I didn’t think Kitamura was going to bleach his own hair~! Ahh, I thought it looked pretty good on him... Maybe it was because I only saw it from far away?! Ah!”

He was too careless. Faced with his bottomless stupidity, Minori blew a fuse. *Bop!* She head-butted him.

“Wh-why you! You smell worse than a buffoon! That’s not the issue! Why didn’t you suspect anything was wrong when Kitamura-kun went home like that and then called you?!”

“Eeeek! You can’t tell me all this stuff at once. I’m going to forget everything you told me earlier~! You’re making me forget!”

“Damn it! You’re jelly! You’re spooge! If you would have just actually listened to Kitamura-kun—if you would have just listened! Why you P. Diddy butter and jelly sandwich! Damn it, I’m going to drag everything you remember out of your head until there’s nothing left!”

“Waah, I’ll be in trouble if you do! I have a life, too~!”

She grabbed his collar and shook him. Unexpectedly, Taiga was the one to stop her.

“Well now, Minorin. There’s no use condemning an idiot with logic.”

Surrounded by enemies on all sides, tears gushed from Haruta’s eyes.

“T-tigeeer~! I can’t believe you would be the one to stand up for me! I’m, like, suuuper happy~! I’m moved! From now on, I won’t call you Aisaka. I’ll call you Tiger! You can call me by my first name, Koji, too!”

“Don’t act all chummy around me, you no-name, stray pig!”

“No! Eek!”

As he tried to cling to her, Taiga gave him a merciless kick to the chin. Her

eyes wriggled like a fang-baring snake in its nest, coiled around itself and filled with disdain and irritation. Her quivering lips were the color of blood, from humiliation she could not hide.

No, she didn't intend to condemn an idiot using logic. It was obvious the only thing burning in Taiga's pitch-black heart was jealousy.

“Anyway, this is getting on my nerves! Why would he go to you and not me? I was thinking about him and sent him an, ‘Are you okay?’ and got nooooothing!”

"Whoa! You sent him something, too?! Hoo-hoo—oh of course!"

Haruta let the true extent of his idiocy show as he pointed with both his hands at Taiga while still sitting on the floor. He didn't think twice about sticking his neck out into a topic so delicate no one else would touch it.

“Why looky here, maybe, just maybe, you were actually together just as the rumors told! Hot hot! Tiger and Kitamura are on fire! Aha ha ha ha...guh.”

"Ryuuji, can I kill him? Can I?"

She grabbed Haruta by the face and hoisted him up. Taiga laughed. “Aha ha.” As she laughed, her pupils grew so cavernous, bats could have roosted in them. As she laughed, she bit too hard on her lip and made herself bleed. *Aha ha ha aha ha ha aha ha ha*, she went, like a broken doll, her head bobbling from side to side. Ryuuji was so frightened, he couldn’t even stop her.

“Fugah ngah...nn...guh...guh...guh...”

She pulled Haruta up until he was on his knees and, unable to breathe, he started to twitch. His arms, which had been struggling to escape, went limp and dropped to his sides. *He might seriously die.* Even as Noto and Minori desperately tried to get her to let go, their voices didn't reach her maddened ears. The sound of something snapping came from under her right hand, which was holding his face.

"Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah
hah hah hah hah hah hah, hah haaah."

Oh, she's serious... Everyone was standing stock-still.

“Hey hey, Takasu-kun! Is it true that Maruo is actually quitting the student

council?!”

Haruta’s body hit the ground, but that sturdy-faced idiot almost immediately sprang back up. In surprise, Taiga, Noto, and Minori turned to the owner of the urgent voice. Ryuuji stood up without thinking when he heard the phrase ‘student council’.

“I heard just now from Ami-chan! Is Maruo really going to quit the council when he’s put so much work into it?! I heard the reason why he’s rebelling has something to do with the student council president. Is that for real?!”

The owner of the voice was Maya. She was fussing with her milk tea-colored hair, seemingly unable to compose herself. Normally she wouldn’t even approach them when Kitamura wasn’t around. Behind Maya’s back was Nanako, whose eyebrows were lowered in worry, and behind both of them was Ami. There was no mistaking that she had let the whole situation leak... That mastermind. The bachelorette had asked her to keep her mouth shut, but that jerk had let everything slip.

Ryuuji glared at her. Ami gave him a quizzical look with wide eyes and shrugged her petite shoulders as though she were trying to say, “What about it?”

This—this—this girl is just so—

“What? Why? What did you hear? What do you know, Ami-chan? Actually, Takasu, what are you hiding?” Noto asked while pushing up his black-framed glasses. If only he had time to make an excuse.

“Huh, Noto, didn’t you hear about it from Takasu-kun? You know what? This morning, Takasu-kun and I were called into the lecture room, and we saw Yuusaku there. The student council president herself was there, too. They told us a ton of stuff. Apparently, it started when something happened at the student council? The president hinted that she knew all about it. Right, that’s right, Takasu-kun. You saw, right, Minori-chan, Taiga? Yuri-chan-sensei took us there by force.”

Minori was the one who replied next. “Yeah, I saw it but...does Kanou-senpai know why Kitamura-kun is rebelling? Does it have something to do with the student council? Hey hey, this is the first I’ve heard of it. Takasu-kun, you told

me and Taiga that the teachers just asked you why Kitamura-kun was acting weird. What's the meaning of this, you blushing bride? Are you trying to imply us old folk wouldn't be able to handle it?"

"Uh..."

His heart hurt, and he was losing feeling in his legs. He would sooner faint than answer, but it wasn't so easy to conveniently lose consciousness. Noto's gaze as he turned away was also accusatory. *Liar!* it cried. As for Taiga, poisonous red beams filled with bloody murder were coming from her eyes. Seeing that situation, Ami donned an abhorrently cute, angelic smile.

"Why Takasu-kun, I wonder what could bring you to lie. Poor Minori-chan and poor everyone else, they all fell for it. And you even did it to your friends. Even though everyone's worried and we're all supposed to be in this together. I see. You're just that kind of person, Takasu-kun."

"Takasu-kun! The magistrate in your heart is crying!"

There was nothing mentally worse than being accused by Minori, whom he loved, with those words. Ryuuji desperately glared back at Ami.

"Wh-why you! You backstabber! Everyone, listen, you've got it all wrong! The teachers told us to keep quiet and not make a big deal out of it for Kitamura's sake! They wanted to get Kitamura back on his feet as though nothing had happened! You just ran your mouth off!"

"You just don't know when to give up. I barely said anything. Is it really a problem? Actually, it was already a big deal to begin with. It's not like we actually know what's going on either. Actually, Yuusaku was the one who yelled that he was quitting the student council when he ran off, anyway. It's not like it's news. You all remember, don't you?"

"It was the first I heard of it..."

"Yeah, the first I knew of it, too..."

"Did he actually say that?"

"Well, I was so taken aback by Maruo yelling... I don't remember..."

"I don't recall it either..."

“I just don’t remember yesterday at all...”

They folded their arms and faced each other, going into an emergency conference.

“Keh.” Ami coldly glanced at them, showing her true nature as her lips contorted. Ryuuji lightly prodded her shoulder.

“Hey look, it was news to everyone! Why are you so loose-lipped about everything? This is the reason why the spinster asked us to keep quiet. This is exactly what she wanted to avoid. What are you doing, rocking the boat?!”

“Huh? I’m just so oblivious, and I’m the type of person who can’t tell a lie. I was just careless.”

“You sham angel! You’re warped! You’re evil!”

That’s what he said. He said what he had wanted to say for so long, at last. As he shook slightly from the feeling of accomplishment, Ami’s face clouded precipitously before his eyes.

“Takasu-kun, don’t go assuming the wrong thing. I’m not evil. I’m just an honest person. Actually, it looks like there are some people who are happy that they found out Kitamura wants to quit the student council. Isn’t that all thanks to me being honest and telling them about it?”

Ami pointed at Taiga, whose shoulders were shaking with laughter she couldn’t hide. *Hee hee hee. Uwah*, Ryuuji pulled Taiga over and hid her so that the others wouldn’t be able to see her laughing. He questioned her in a low voice.

“T-Taiga, aren’t you having the wrong reaction to this?! This isn’t anything to laugh about!”

However, Taiga continued to laugh. She narrowed her eyes like a beast lurking in the dark.

“I *am* worried about Kitamura-kun,” she said. “I wish from the bottom of my heart that he’ll go back to being his normal and happy self. But, but...but! If Kitamura-kun says that he wants to quit the student council, I’m celebrating that! He’ll finally be free from the grips of that aggravating housefly of a bossy

elitist baboon!”

What selfishness. She was just happy because it benefitted her. *See*. He heard Ami’s high-pitched laughter. Taiga was definitely just as bad as Ami. Ryuuji scowled like a severed head that had taken one last leap in order to sink its teeth into the carotid artery of the one who beheaded it. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but there was something particularly terrifying about the evilness of girls.

“Anyway, the key to why Maruo is acting up is the student council. Is that right?! Yeah, he snapped when the election was mentioned. Now we know why! This is pretty bad! The student council is Maruo’s life. In which case, I wonder what we can do for Maruo!”

Maya stood up passionately, her hands balled into fists. Nanako soothed her, *there there*. Her own cheeks grew red, and it seemed that she really wanted to do something.



“That’s right, Ami-chan! Do you have any good ideas?!”

“Whaaat, me?”

“That’s right, Ami-chan! You’re Maruo’s childhood friend, plus we can always count on you! Please, do something to help us get Maruo back on his feet!”

It seemed this was the one time Ami wasn’t going to use her goody-two-shoes iron mask. She folded her arms and tilted her head. Ryuuji had some words he wanted to say that he couldn’t get out.

“Dimhuahua isn’t someone you can depend on.”

“Gyah!”

Taiga said it for him. As she said it, she took one of Noto’s cold French fries and stuck it right up Ami’s nose. Daringly and aggressively, she twisted and pushed it in further.

Ohhh, uncensored! Noto and Haruta stared at Ami’s nostril. Ryuuji had a flashback to his own menthol trauma and unconsciously held his nose. Taiga had found another ruthless technique to subject Ami’s body to.

“Dimhuahua, you’re dim, you’re stupid, you’re idiotic. Dimhuahua, your brain lacks grace, elegance, and more, but most of all it lacks kindness. The only thing you’re good at is impressions, and you don’t even look like the people you can do.”

“That hurt! Are you an idiot?!”

“Ugh...”

Ami hit Taiga’s head hard. She held her nose, letting her tears fall. *Ami-chan, here’s a tissue, pass that around*, Maya and Nanako kindly offered her a pack of pocket tissues. Then Minori grabbed Taiga’s small head and shook her.

“Why you! Why you, Taigaaaa! You can’t be violent like that!”

She used her other hand to assiduously push back the hair that had fallen onto her cheek.

“Why would someone have to look like the person they’re doing an impression of?! Third year! Class B!”

“Shut up, Kushieda! This isn’t the time for that! There’s salt coming out of Ami-chan’s nose!”

“M-Maya-chan, don’t mention that!”

Ami shamelessly stole the tissues from Maya’s hand and glared at Taiga with wet eyes.

“Tiger...you’ve seriously made me angry, today of all days!”

“What are you acting all high and mighty about when you’ve got salt all up in your nose, you baldie?”

“I’m not balding.”

“I hope you go bald.”

“I won’t!”

The boys, who had relevant anxieties about the future, all went silent as the words pierced their hearts. Heredity...stress...friction on the scalp...aging...a fate they could not avoid...Vegeta’s M...that or Nappa... The boys’ unsettled hearts turned like kaleidoscopes. However, Taiga and Ami exchanged grating and increasingly thorny jeers without any reserve for the boys’ sensitive feelings.

“Ahh, come to think of it, you’re a hairy little ball like Mojacko. Yeah, you definitely won’t go bald. If you’re that dedicated to your hair being extra full-bodied and bushy then I hope you get a Stuttgart growth of it.”

“Whaaat did you say?! Ugh, seriously, you’re getting on my nerves! I’m fine being bald! I’ll go bald! I’m balding!”

This time Ami’s loud voice didn’t just affect the boys near her. It crossed through the class and made the hearts of everyone with a Y chromosome sink.

“Seriously, I don’t care anymore! I don’t care anymore! You can give me your worst, you spoiled brat of a tiger! Actually, according to rumors, you’re supposedly Yuusaku’s new girlfriend, aren’t you?! Keh, how stupid! Sure, you’ve got brains and kindness and sharps or whatever, I don’t know! The only thing you haven’t got enough of is height!”

“Whaaat?!” said Maya. “Ami-chan, how could you?!”

What did you just say? Taiga bared her teeth even more, but Ami dauntlessly brushed her aside. It might have been because she had already gone as far as to abandon her iron mask, but she let her true nature come dripping through as she contorted her pretty face and sounded off.

“I don’t care what Yuusaku does to begin with! That spoiled honors student is just toeing the line. He’s crying like a baby, but he’s not actually in any danger. He’s just trying to get attention! Worrying about that idiot will just make you look like an idiot! Maya and Nanako were worrying, so I told them what I know, but to be honest, you must know in your hearts that that’s what he’s doing!”

The evil Chihuahua wore a victorious expression. She snorted and looked coldly at Ryuuji, who had been the most worried about Kitamura.

“Actually, did you all forget? It’s already winter of our second year. We have to seriously start thinking about our college tests soon, don’t we? Well, I think that blond guy ran away at a convenient time because he was selfish. You don’t have any extra time to waste on someone like Yuusaku, do you? While you’re all doing that, all our other classmates—our rivals—are getting ready for college exams and thinking about the future. They’re going to leave you further and further behind. But, Yuusaku, that honors student, is leaving you behind and wasting your time for his own benefit. He’s studying tons by himself. Maybe he’ll get into a good school? Even if he doesn’t become the student council president, he’s done well enough, and he’s the one everyone’s betting on for the future.

“If someone like that so much as cries, somebody is bound to try saving him. He knows that well enough, too.”

She said the last part as though it were only to herself.

They lost their ability to reply in the face of reasoning that was so solid. Ami clapped her hands lightly together and smiled with her goody-two-shoes mask back on.

“So now, everyone! The lunch break is going to end soon, and we need to prepare for our next class! Time is limited. If you keep acting like everything’s a festival, life can’t go on. Now, Noto-kun, hurry and eat your bento. Look, Haruta-kun, wipe that drool away. Takasu-kun, you’ll get arrested with that face

you've got, so go plastic surgery it away."

"Sh-shut up!"

Ryuuji glared futilely at Ami's back as she stood and walked away, laughing like a true villain. Minori poked Ryuuji's back. He turned around to see her face but didn't know what to say now that he had been caught in a lie.

"Takasu-kun, or rather, the magistrate in Takasu-kun's heart, how about we try going to Kitamura-kun's place after school?"

"Huh?"

Ryuuji was at a loss for words at Minori's unexpected proposal. She played with the ends of her hair with her fingertips.

"Well, I really am worried for him. Don't you want to at least see his face? I don't know what happened at the student council, but let's go together. A girl going to visit a guy by herself is awkward. Ahmin probably won't come with the way she's acting. Taiga, would you come?"

Before she could ask, Taiga slipped between Minori and Ryuuji and poked her head out. "Nnnngh." She shook her head side to side.

To Minori, she gave her official reason, "I think having fewer people go will make it easier to talk to Kitamura-kun." Then she did a 180 and whispered her selfish, true motives to Ryuuji, "I really want to see Kitamura-kun's house, but right now, there's something even better that I want. Honestly, I want Kitamura-kun to completely cut off all ties to the student council! So, you go and get it done, you dog."

Ryuuji would go with Minori after school. Under normal circumstances, the opportunity that had fallen into his lap would have made him feel like he could float in mid-air just by meditating.

However, the hardship of the mission weighed on his heart more than his delight. He wasn't planning on listening to Taiga's selfish wishes. For starters, Ryuuji didn't think he could get Kitamura to obediently tell him what had happened just by going on a house visit. He had no idea what the guy was

thinking. According to Ami, it had something to do with a romantic relationship involving the student president, but he couldn't possibly believe that.

He still didn't understand Kitamura's reasoning. The truth was that Kitamura was rebelling, and it was just speculation that it had to do with the student council or the president herself. Since he was going to see Kitamura at his house, Ryuuji just needed to help with his rehabilitation, no matter how little he could do.

When the afternoon class began, Ryuuji's face made him look like a poisoned demon. None of the teachers could look him straight in the eyes. He wasn't reprimanded even when he looked out the window, and the boring period of classical literature dispassionately droned on.

School continued without the missing class representative.

Chapter 3

Ryuuji crouched with his bag on his lap in front of the school gate as he waited for Minori. She had been stopped by underclassmen from the softball club just as they were leaving the school. In front of Ryuuji's eyes, girls who looked like first years parted to the left and right as they waved, "Bye bye!" "See you tomorrow!"

Since he didn't want to scare them for no reason, Ryuuji intentionally looked away. He wasn't staring at them, he wasn't looking like he had discovered prey, and he didn't look like he was targeting them. Instead, he stared intently at his beautifully polished shoes.

Minori rushed out of the school gate under the twilight of the frost-colored sky.

"Sorry for making you wait! Off we go!"

"R-right."

Her footsteps were light as she ran out of the school gates and swung her bag around. Ryuuji stood up and joined her side as though there were nothing to it. He knew that the smell of fresh peaches faintly wafting towards him as he drew near was from her hair. He knew that, and even though his heart was weighed down with worry over Kitamura's unusual behavior, it still thumped hard and sincere just once.

It was also because of his sincerity that Ryuuji could be alone together with Minori after school without acting like a fool. His legs didn't so much as waver as he headed straight towards Kitamura's house.

"It's a bit of a walk, are you fine with that?"

"Yeah, I'm A-okay. So you know where his house is?"

"It's past the bridge. It's towards the high-speed railway in a neighborhood with a whole bunch of detached houses."

"I see, it's like its own little town. They live pretty close to me."

Minori nodded to herself as she walked deliberately and restlessly onwards. She was going absurdly fast, and he was a little flustered as he jogged to catch up. He was still behind Minori and felt like she might leave him in the dust. Since he was following her, he decided to tell her what he had been waiting eagerly to say. He timidly reached out to her shoulder from behind.

“Wait a second! Hey...about lunch. Sorry. Sorry for not telling you about Kitamura.”

“Ueheh!”

The moment he touched her, it happened.

The strange shout seemed to have escaped from her throat at the same moment she unintentionally stumbled on an elevation change in the street. It wasn't that she had tried to avoid Ryuuji's hand and had jumped away.

Minori stumbled for a moment, but she regained her balance on her own. Had she been Taiga, she would have fallen right down. But Minori wasn't Taiga. Ryuuji was so surprised that he didn't even offer her a hand.

Hee hee hee. Minori laughed it off.

“Wow, that was a scare. That was close. Yeah, yeah, it's fine. It's not like there was anything else you could do. Yuri-sensei told you not to say anything, didn't she?”

As Ryuuji nodded, she flashed him a peace sign.

“I've got nothing against that. It's obvious you're really worried about Kitamura-kun.”

It seemed she was broad-mindedly forgiving him about everything. She waited for Ryuuji and started walking again, but this time at a slower pace than before. They were now close enough to have a conversation.

“You could say that I'm not the type who can be flexible about things like that. I'm just not the type of person who can ignore something coming from a homeroom teacher and do whatever I feel like. I've never even turned in my homework late in my whole life.”

“It's fine, it's fine. That's who you are, Takasu-kun. You're honest.”

“Well, someone else was even more honest than me and spilled the beans.”

“Aha ha ha, you mean Ahmin.”

Their faintly white, fog-like breath melted and disappeared into the chilling and darkening dusk. The same face had probably appeared in both their minds —*You’re off to Yuusaku’s house? Whoa, the two of you alone together? Hmm, that seems suuuper fun. I’m so jealous of how close you are.* It was Ami’s face as she finally went home, spewing poison. Her smile had looked more innocent than a fairy playing in an enchanted forest.

As he recalled it, his irritation returned. Ami’s behavior had grated on his nerves when she had done that—actually all the things she had done leading up to now that were related to Kitamura-kun grated on him.

“Seriously, what’s with her? Just a little while ago, she was all about pretending to be a leader and acting like she knew everything, like a real adult. This time around, she’s gotten rid of that goody-two-shoes fake personality and made her villainous debut.”

“What’s wrong with that? I like Ahmin all grown up, but I like Ahmin as a villain just as much.”

“And here we have another curiosity...”

Minori was Taiga’s friend, after all. Maybe Minori’s taste in women was just as manic.

That was a stupid thought. He was the one who was in unrequited love with Minori and practically roommates with Taiga. From an outside perspective, his taste in women would have been equally strange.

When they reached the crossing where Minori would wait for Taiga and Ryuuji every morning, Ryuuji and Minori took a different direction for the first time ever, away from the Takasu house. The dead leaves on the Zelkova-lined sidewalk scattered in the blowing wind.

“Ahmin-san...”

He tried to steal a glance at Minori’s profile, but the cold wind that blew at that moment made him automatically close his eyes.

“...Must be super worried about Kitamura-kun. Just like us. She might even be more hurt than us.”

“Even though she was acting like that?!”

“That’s right. That’s what I think. Look, Ahmin has been working in the adult world. For a while now, at that.”

I guess, Ryuuji agreed, and as though she had been waiting for that, Minori continued. She was strangely calm, but her conviction was strong.

“Ahmin knows a lot more than us kids about the real world. Since they’ve been friends since childhood, she even knows things about Kitamura-kun that we don’t know. But no one else understands what she knows. She’s kind of being patient when everyone else around her is being childish. She’s not trying to pull the wool over our eyes. She’s even humoring us. What Ahmin is saying is logical to the point it’s scary, isn’t it? There aren’t many friends who would tell you the truth like that. Normal people would be afraid of having you hate them, or making things awkward, that they’d phrase everything so it sounded better, wouldn’t they?”

“Is that really a good thing? Don’t you think it’s just her bad personality?”

“No. Ahmin is a good person. She’s super good. That’s the only thing that’s for certain. Takasu-kun, you must know that, too.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t. Are you saying this even though you’ve seen how she really is? Are you still falling for the mask she’s got on even after all this time?”

“None of that stuff about a mask or what she’s really like is relevant. There is no fake Ahmin or real Ahmin. Ahmin is just Ahmin. I think Ahmin has her reasons, even when she says stuff that rubs people the wrong way like she did today.

“Actually,” she said, suddenly looking up at Ryuuji’s face.

Their eyes met, and Ryuuji knew the sincerity of Minori’s words.

“That’s what I hope it is. Sorry for saying this, but there’s a ton of stuff you don’t know either, right, Takasu-kun? Even though you want to be someone who knows, you aren’t. I want to think Ahmin really understands everything,

even if she's the only one. It's kind of like, because of our immaturity, we can't understand, but the fact that we can't understand even though she wants us to is our saving grace... Ahh, I don't know what I'm saying anymore!"

Minori suddenly averted her eyes. She held her tongue, turned around, and walked quickly in long strides. "Is Kitamura-kun's house this way?" she muttered as she walked farther and farther away. Her ears were slightly red; it seemed her serious monologue had embarrassed her. Ryuuji's heart was suddenly filled with passion—that was what he liked about her.

Her face, dyed vermillion from embarrassment, was cute. It wasn't just that—he liked that she didn't shy away from being earnest. It was these glances into how straightforward she was about life that made him fall in love with her over and over again.

Minori was kinder than anyone. She was sincere, and that made his blood run warm. She glowed with righteous power. She was like bright sunlight that could reach him even when he was in the pits of depression.

"Kushieda...how do I put this...you're really kind."

Though it wasn't much, those words were the closest thing he could manage to being a shout from his very soul.

"Kind?!"

Her voice suddenly echoed. It was almost a shriek. Minori came to a jumping halt. She flipped around and looked up at Ryuuji. A passing pregnant woman who was coming back from shopping looked at Minori and Ryuuji with surprise as they faced each other in the middle of the street.

"No, that's not true! I'm just so arrogant, I don't know when to stop and—"

Minori's face was neither happy nor angry as she wrung out a small whisper, "—It's just...too hard..."

She didn't give him time to ask what she really meant. She simply looked down. She even hunched forward.

"K-Kushieda?"

"..."

Minori stopped moving, as though she had frozen solid. Ryuuji hesitated over whether it was okay to touch her back. The palm of his hand loitered in the air, and the words that he should have said escaped him, drifting further and further away.

“Kushieda...hey, look. I said hey...”

Then there were several more seconds where he couldn't do anything.

“No! Sorry! I'm passing on my turn! Nothing's the matter, Joey Wheeler!”

When Minori finally raised her face, she was chuckling. Her laugh had a complexity to it, as though it contained both melancholy and embarrassment, but it was still a laugh.

“Well, really...lately there's been a lot of...like, how should I put this...yeah. Sorry. There isn't anything wrong. I'm completely fine! Sorry!”

“What's going on with you?”

“Huh?”

He had hesitated over whether to say anything, but in the end he did.

“What's with that complicated look on your face? I don't get your reasoning... What are you sorry for? What are you saying that there's been a lot of? Who's Joey Wheeler?”

“Oh, sorr...wait, no, uhh...yeah...you're right.”

“I don't think our 'saving grace' really amounts to much. But...I want to understand you completely. It's not like Kawashima has to be the one to understand you. Couldn't it be me? Am I that useless? Am I not good enough? I'm immature just like you said, but...I want to understand. I even want to understand all this stuff.”

It was like he was trying to edge up to her.

It was like little by little, without her noticing, he was crawling along, trying to get closer to her.

Ryuuji quietly tried to close the distance. He meant what he said. He wanted her to reply with something. He didn't want her to notice, but he wanted her to

notice. In the moments he waited for her response, his lips grew dry, and he bit them as he endured. He didn't want her to notice that his fingertips were going cold, so he stuck them deep into his pockets.

"I'm scared..."

That was all she said.

She pretended to rub her eyes to hide her face. He could only see the smile on her lips.

"Takasu-kun, you must think I'm so much better than I really am. But you'll understand everything someday. If you understand me entirely, then I'm sure that—"

"We don't have much time, do we?!"

Minori lifted her lowered face in surprise at Ryuuji's sudden shout.

"Wasn't that what Kawashima said? That's true, too. Everything has a time limit. Our time will be up when we change classes or graduate or get to the end of our life spans. If we don't do anything about it, we'll end up cutting our time short at the point when 'Takasu-kun didn't understand because he was immature.' Is that the point where you want to part ways? I'm not planning to always be immature. And it's not like I think you're a saint who doesn't even go to the restroom, so lighten up."

Lighten up because I like you, he added only to himself. No matter which Minori appeared before him, even if she were different from what he thought she was like, he would love her for all eternity. Though he couldn't get into the frame of mind to tell her that. He had at least said the thing that he wanted to say and everything that he needed to say.

...Wait a second.

Had he revealed too much? After saying all of that, Ryuuji was suddenly assaulted by the winds of cowardice. It was too late for regrets, but maybe he had been too rash. *I said that*, he thought. *What do I do?* He stood stock-still.

"Shimmer shimmer shimmer shimmer..."

"What..."

In the face of Minori's glittering eccentricity, everything, from his regret to his delicate boyish heart, was transient and scattered to the winds.

Her hands were outstretched, and her face was overcome with the serenity of meditation, like a Buddha. Her eyes, half-closed, gazed as though she were admiring and caressing the people of three thousand realms. Minori had reached enlightenment in the middle of a street. The radiant and blinding aura that came from her entire body was made substantive as she vocalized it with her mouth, "Shimmer shimmer." She balanced beautifully on the tips of her toes with a wide, triangular stance.

"You know what your words made me feel like just now, Takasu-kun? I'm about to ascend. Shimmer shimmer... I'm happy. That's what I think, for real. If you know that's what I think, that's enough. And I think that I'll just wait like this until someday, the day that you understand everything comes. ...Shimmer shimmer shimmer..."

He was drawn right into Minori's glittering world, but suddenly he stopped in his tracks. In the end, she was basically saying that she still couldn't explain what was going on in her heart. But she was also saying that she might eventually be able to lend her heart to Ryuuji. That was what Minori wanted to tell him, behind her veil of eccentricity.

Maybe he was just interpreting it in the way that suited him. But at the same time, radiant as she was, it was Minori's fault for saying things in a way that could be interpreted like that.

What a great thing to look forward to. Ryuuji smiled in spite of himself.

"I'm okay with that for now. I said everything that I wanted to say. Actually, it's like...someday, I want to actually know you. That's enough for me, too."

He said it quickly. Before his eyes, Minori's face melted. She looked like a baby on the verge of crying or throwing a tantrum.

"..."

She still wasn't saying anything, but her grimace simply turned into a full-out smile. The smile she turned on Ryuuji seemed genuinely happy and tender. Her lips quivered as though she had more to say, but Minori stopped. As though she

were unable to say any more, she put her fist to her lips.

The words that should have come overflowing from her throat didn't reach Ryuuji in the end. But he didn't think that there was anything missing. This was fine for now. This way, Ryuuji could smile back at her.

Minori's eyes, which had narrowed from her smile, quivered for just a moment as though they had found something flying in the air above Ryuuji's head.

They were conscious of the delicate distance that was between them and felt like they were almost walking on air, but at the same time, whatever they did was visible from heaven. Eventually, they arrived at a neighborhood filled with large, old residences next to newly-built small houses. Once they reached the front of an old, but not very big, gray house with very little foliage, Ryuuji and Minori looked at each other awkwardly with dumbstruck faces. "Huh?"

When they pressed the doorbell under the doorplate that said 'Kitamura', no one came out. A brightly polished bike that should have been Kitamura's older brother's was in front of the house, and the rain shutters on the second floor were open. An electric bike with an insurance company sticker that Kitamura's mother seemed to have borrowed from work had been left out. However, no matter how many times they pressed the doorbell, there was no sign of a response.

"I wonder if they're out? Hmm."

Minori muttered and tried calling Kitamura on her cell phone. "No answer," she said. She flipped her phone shut in the middle of the voicemail recording. Ryuuji's chest suddenly froze over. As though chiding him for forgetting his friend in his glee, the wind slipped into his jacket and caressed his chest like cold hands. Taiga had borrowed his scarf that day, too.

"I'm home. Don't leave the lock open. A lot of weird things have been happening lately. A pervert won't care if you've got a kid in high school. Ahh,

these bags are heavy. The cabbage was so cheap.”

He stepped in from the dark entryway. The time he spent preparing dinner was family time for him and Yasuko, without Taiga. It was quiet, and the only sound came from the television.

Ryuuji was normally inattentive and a little talkative around this time. Still in his school uniform, he headed straight to the kitchen while still talking. He put down the cabbage that filled his ecobag (of his own making. He had simply sewn together fabric scraps he had bought at the flea market for fifty yen, but the bag was still pretty sturdy and could hold a lot. When he brought it to school once, it had started the girls from the craft club talking. He had ended up showing about fifteen of them how to make one after school one day. The Japanese pattern was nice, too!). He skillfully put the perishables away in the fridge. The two whole cabbages he had bought weighed down his hands again when he grabbed them.

“Yeah, I can’t believe I got real Gunma prefecture cabbages at this price. Sometimes even our local supermarket comes through. If you ask me why I went to the trouble, it’s because today was a mess. It was because Kitamura—yeah, *that* Kitamura—is rebelling. Can you believe it? He just suddenly comes in with his hair dyed blond. If you’re asking me whether it works for him, it definitely doesn’t! He looks super weird! But, look, that definitely has to be a sign or something. Anyway, I was worried, so I went all the way to his house and was going to talk to him, but he ended up not even being there. I’m beat. Seriously, that guy, he’s got everyone worried... I got all riled up and went on a shopping spree buying these cabbages... Ah, hey. When you use a cup, you’ve got to at least rinse it out. With all that sugary stuff you drink, it gets all sticky. Those hybrid fruit flies that don’t die in the cold are all stuck to it. This isn’t a flytrap. But I wonder where these flies come from. We’re pretty good about throwing out the trash in the house, so they shouldn’t have time to breed... Maybe they’re coming from the landlady’s? Well, she lives by herself and is getting on in years, but that old lady’s thorough, so I don’t think that she’s up to anything weird, but still these flies—”

“Flies can invade through the sewage lines. Well, you probably know that better than I do...”

“...”

Splash. The sponge grasped in Ryuuji’s hand, which he had been using to wash the glass, fell into the sink. The wasted soap melted into the water and disappeared into weak lather.

The person sitting in front of the table in the living room where the TV was on should have been Yasuko. *Why is it that, out of all people, he thought, you’re here?*

He had lost his voice out of surprise. His heart raced, and he felt like every hair in every pore of his whole body was standing on end. There was just one corner of his mind that was strangely composed; it realized he wouldn’t even be able to yell if he actually ever were burglarized. He couldn’t even say anything to the person whom he had just been trying to find, much less a real burglar.

“I ran away from home. Sorry for being a burden.”

Ryuuji somehow raised his suds-covered hand. He could at least manage that. It was the only reaction he could accomplish and only when he focused all his willpower into it, at that.

The person in the living room was sitting with his legs folded under himself at the table. Just as he had that morning, he still had his dirty uniform on. The blond boy looking up at Ryuuji, who was standing in the kitchen, also raised his hand to match.

Don’t you say, “Yo.” Ryuuji thought. *Say where were you, or why didn’t you call us back, or everyone was worried, or what got into you, or—the* overabundance of things he wanted to say were caught in a traffic jam inside his throat. It was at that moment that another voice came into the conversation.

“I’m home. ★ Oh, Ryuu-chan’s shoes are here. In which case...uwah, Ryuu-chan, welcome home~! Hey, hey, did you know I have news?! Kitamura-kun is at our house~! Right, he’s here, isn’t he? That’s why I went to Family Mart to buy him underwear. ★ And I ripped my last pair of stockings, so I went to get those, too! Huh? What’s wrong? You don’t seem too happy.”

She had unnaturally thin eyebrows, a childish, makeup-free face, and shabby

striped pants from Uniqlo that also served as pajamas. She had appeared barefoot, wearing the top of Ryuuji's tracksuit from his junior high days. Yasuko was laughing giddily. Then, as carefree as ever, she handed over the plastic bag that held Kitamura's underwear. Kitamura, being Kitamura, was going on and on as he happily received the underwear, *Thank you! Oh, these are great boxers!* Ryuuji didn't think this was the time for any of this. He had a mountain of things to say, and what had Kitamura said? What had that been about running away from home?

Running away...from home?!

Kitamura had run away from his home into Ryuuji's!

And at dinnertime!

But he only had three portions of tonkatsu fried pork ready!

What was he going to do?!

He was in shocked silence. His mother seemed in a strangely good mood. She was fawning over her still flabbergasted son's shoulder.

"You know, I promised to go eat yakiniku with Shizuyo-chan (Bishamon Heaven's number two) before going to work. So I don't need dinner today."

"Y-you're going to...yakiniku. Oh, in that case, we're safe on tonkatsu... Actually, don't people normally go to things like that after work? Shouldn't you be going in the morning?"

"Nah, by the time I finish work, I'm out of it to the point that understanding Japanese is beyond me. And we kind of want to talk about how the boyfriend Shizuyo-chan was going to marry, who was supposed to be a thirty-year-old company president, turned out to be a seventeen-year-old job-hopper. I know, shocking, right? She was really down because their relationship might've been illegal, so I'm going to hear her out while I'm sober."

"Is that something you can actually help her with by just talking with her?"

"I dunno. But it's yakiniku. ★ First-class mouthwatering roast. ★ Fried fat. ★ It's gonna be rejuvenating. ★"

So you just want a meal out of it, thought Ryuuji. Yasuko went into her own

room, possibly to go change. Ryuuji, for the time being, gave Kitamura a floor cushion since his friend was still sitting on the tatami mat with his legs folded under him.

Anyway, I guess I should put on some tea, he thought. Right then, a pale hand motioned for him past the sliding door. When he approached, Yasuko pulled her son into her room, closed the door, and spoke in a hushed voice.

“This is a secret, but I spoke with Kitamura-kun’s family already. Tomorrow is Saturday anyway. School’s not in, and I don’t have work, so I told him we’d take care of him here.”

“So he’s not really running away from home so much as—”

“That’s right. He’s just spending the night. Actually, I had this...”

Yasuko rummaged around a chest that was scattered with makeup supplies and pulled a piece of paper from it. It was signed with neat handwriting. Strangely, it looked like an oath, and an authentic one at that.

We pledge that should either son from the Kitamura or Takasu families run away from home, that we will promptly inform the other of his whereabouts.

Signed, Kitamura Keiko. Signed, Takasu Yasuko.

“Oh ho... When did you make this?”

“Last year. We got Kitamura-kun’s mom her insurance, right? After that, we kind of got caught up in the mood, and the two of us made this pact. So, Ryuuchan, if you ever plan on running away, you’ll be told on right away if you go to Kitamura-kun’s house. Be careful now.”

“How’s that trap going to work now that you’ve told me?”

“Ohh? What? Oh~! Right! No way, forget this ever happened!”

Leaving behind his mother, whose face had turned peach-colored as she wriggled and writhed around in her tracksuit, Ryuuji closed the sliding door. Despite himself, he looked around the immaculate room as though looking for

the springs and screws that might have dropped from Yasuko's head.

Maybe Kitamura thought that those sharp eyes were thinking over something or that the consultation between the mother and son had gone in some other direction.

"Takasu, um...sorry for coming here so suddenly without even letting you know in advance."

Kitamura bowed apologetically, scratching his blond head. Ryuuji swung his head side to side sincerely and waved his hand.

"No, I don't know what happened, but I was worried. I'm actually glad that you came to my house, even though it was a surprise."

"Yasuko-san said to come in, so I took advantage..."

"Oh, that's fine. You can take your time running away from home. Actually, let's go hang out somewhere tomorrow. You must have a ton you want to talk about, right?"

"..."

The blond boy was silent for an awkward amount of time. It happened at that moment.

"I'm huuuuuuuuuungry! What's today's main course?!"

KABLAM! The door of the ramshackle house swung open. Today, too, she had come in making a grand entrance, brazenly opening the door as though she were trying to destroy the rental. She came in with her duplicate key just as usual and right on time, according to her alarm clock of a stomach. Ryuuji was no longer surprised by her shameless entrances, but Kitamura's eyes went wide with surprise.

This is going to be such a mess, Ryuuji thought, stealthily holding his breath as the haughty footsteps steadily approached. He wasn't worried about Kitamura this time. Once she saw this scene, she might die. He'd be the one saddled with holding a wake at his house for her funeral.

"Hey, what kind of meat is it?! What kind of fish?! Tell me! What's for today..."

“Oh, Aisaka?! Well, what a coincidence! What’s wrong? Are you running away from home, too?!”

She stood there imposingly.

She was bundled in a frilly, red-checked dress and a knit cardigan with a hood. The color of her face impressively went from white to blue, then to red and once again to blue, and finally to the overripe red-black of a tomato.

“...¿QUÉ?...!”

She had turned into a foreigner.

Taiga wailed something in an unknown language. Her whole body faltered as she spiraled out of control. Then she fell right over.

“Huh?! Aisaka?! Hey, Takasu, there’s something wrong with Aisaka!”

Taiga already looked like she was in trouble before Kitamura even pointed it out. In a fluster, Ryuuji approached her and tried to help her up.

“T-Taiga...hold it together! Live! Kitamura ran away from home! He’s staying over here tonight!”

He patted her cheek. Taiga was just barely holding on. Her eyelashes fluttered as she opened her eyes. She started to crawl away. Without saying a word, she put a hand on the wall, trembled as she stood up, and zombie-walked to the front door. He heard the door shut with a *clack*.

Then, after five seconds, the seldom-used doorbell of the Takasu house went off. *Gulp*. Ryuuji swallowed and headed to the front door. It was useless. This wasn’t fooling anybody. She couldn’t pull the blinds on Kitamura. Even though he knew it was definitely futile, he still opened the door.

“Th-th-th-th-th-th—”

Taiga put a too-suspicious, mask-like smile on her face and stuttered.

“Th-thank you for inviting me today!”

“You...you’re welcome.”

Ryuuji guided her in; she put up a shaking hand as she saw Kitamura.

“Ooooooh my!” she said. “Wh-wh-wh-wh-what a coincidence, K-K-K-K-

Kitamura-kun.”

“Yo, Aisaka! Nice seeing you again!”

She could never fool him by doing something like this, but Kitamura, who was overly broad-minded, or maybe just too easygoing, turned a grin to Taiga. Even though he was bright blond. Even though he had run away from home. Even though he had been treated to underwear.

Yasuko headed out to yakiniku and work, leaving the three kids behind. Ryuuji kept a sixteen-beat tempo as he chopped cabbage; the sound echoed through the kitchen. Quietly turning back, he snooped on the others and their faltering conversation in the living room.

“Come to think of it, you said you lived in the condo next door before. I didn’t know you lived by yourself.”

“Y-yeah. Ya-chan told me I could come over for dinner every day, so I’ve been taking advantage...”

“I see. It’s good for you that the Takasus live next door.”

“Y-yeah. Ahhh uh...”

“Oh, Inko-chan likes you quite a bit, too, Aisaka, licking your finger like that. Oh ho...what a daring tongue...”

Actually, it was only Taiga who was faltering. Kitamura was going to the pace of his own drum like normal. He watched happily as Taiga supplied Inko-chan with a piece of cabbage. They were both in oddly relaxed (though only in appearance) positions, lying on their bellies on the tatami with floor cushions folded up, holding them in the same way. They waved their legs lazily, holding their cheeks in their hands. The birdcage sat between them.

“But tatami is really nice. At my house, my grampa was tricked by a dealer a few years ago into remodeling all the Japanese rooms with really cheap-looking linoleum floors. I don’t have a room where I can lay around like this.”

“M-my house is all western style, too... Tatami really is nice...”

“Japanese-style rooms really bring you down to earth. It’s pretty sloppy, but I

want to roll around like this at home, too.”

“We have the same opinion, don’t we...ehhe hee.”

Though they were both Western-style rooms, Kitamura’s place and Taiga’s grand condo were probably pretty different in actuality. They were nodding along, so he didn’t correct them. Ryuuji faintly grinned at one corner of his mouth as he went back to shredding the cabbage. The knife went at a rhythm too elegant for the speed he was going at. Of course, he didn’t talk to the two on purpose. It was cute that Taiga was acting like a housebroken cat, and though Kitamura was blond, it seemed he was relaxed. It all looked like it was going well from the sidelines.

Maybe, if it went well—Ryuuji stabbed the blade into the cabbage’s core as his evil eyes burned with psychotic blue fire. It wasn’t that he was swearing to the god of death that he would chase the two to the final circles of hell and tear them into pieces even if they reincarnated—call it a lucky break, but coming to this point, Kitamura’s abnormal behavior seemed to be working out okay. Ryuuji’s worry hadn’t disappeared, but seeing him like this, Kitamura seemed in pretty good spirits. Something bad might have happened at the student council, but after running away from home for a day and putting up a little rebellion, that might be the end of it.

“Inko-chan’s slobbering everywhere trying to eat that cabbage. That’s nice, having a pet. They’re so cute.”

“Th-they’re cute...yeah. They are cute...maybe just a little...”

A happy laugh came from behind him. He would be grateful if there were more and more events that brought Kitamura and Taiga, and him and Minori closer. Ryuuji hummed unconsciously as he wrapped the core, which he had easily sliced through. *Mottainai ♪. Mottainai ♪*. Of course, he put the precious core in the fridge. The next day he would slice it up and use it for soup with some bacon. It would be a good soup base.

“Fwa ha ha!”

“Whoa! What are you doing? Go and keep Kitamura company over there.”

Taiga had come to cling to him like a child that had run from her family in

embarrassment. Just when they were alone, and she could spend time with Kitamura, she was rolling up her sleeves. She looked giddy from her good mood.

“I’m going to help with something! Right, I’m good at washing, so that’s what I’ll do! What should I wash?!”

“You’re...good...at it?”

“Yeah! I am!”

It seemed her ulterior motive was to show Kitamura her good side. But Ryuuji wasn’t the type of sloppy guy who could let used cooking utensils pile up in the washing bucket. As he finished using them, he would also quickly wash them, wipe them down, and put them away. The only things he hadn’t done that for were things that he planned on using again soon.

Ryuuji wanted to question her claim that she was good at washing, but he grasped Taiga’s feelings. He whispered to her.

“Anyway, you want to impress him, right?”

“Yeah!”

She nodded with him and checked on Kitamura by stealthily turning back. Kitamura was lying on his side and watching Inko-chan, who was shaking all over from taking on the dregs of the cabbage. *Good*, Ryuuji thought. He made his voice carry.

“Okay, I’ll have Taiga help today, too! Make those really good fried eggs again!”

It wouldn’t be unusual to have eggs with tonkatsu, and moreover, he had already made the miso soup, and the only things he could think of that were easy enough for Taiga to make were fried eggs or boiled spinach, and he didn’t have spinach stocked. Taiga nodded and grandly announced, “I got it! I’m good at making eggs, right?! I’ll make them!”

“Oh, so you’re good at making fried eggs, Aisaka?” said Kitamura. “True skill becomes obvious with the simple things. And here I thought you were no good with household chores. That sure was rude of me! I’m looking forward to this!”

He turned a grin to her.

“Ho ho, just you wait!” she answered, her tone honeymooner-sweet.

This is good, Ryuuji thought. He had a sinister smile on his face, just like a wraith’s. He took three eggs from the refrigerator and handed them to Taiga. *Oh, that’s not true*, Taiga was saying to Kitamura as she wriggled out of embarrassment. Her cheeks reddened as she took the eggs. She said in a voice so small that only Ryuuji could hear:

“And now what?”

“Hm?”

“I said, and now what? What am I supposed to do with these to make fried eggs?”

That was a surprise! He dropped the knife, which was covered in cabbage bits that had been cut needle-thin. He had thought even Taiga would be able to make eggs, but Ryuuji seemed to have underestimated her ineptitude.

“Sorry!”

“You can apologize for having Kitamura-kun at your house in the first place. Actually, why are you apologizing? Just tell me already. What am I supposed to do with these? Oh, and make sure Kitamura-kun doesn’t realize that you’re teaching me.”

Gulp. Ryuuji swallowed his breath. He would have to secretly teach this clumsy, idiotic tiger how to make eggs as he fried the tonkatsu. It came to him that this might end up being mission impossible, but he couldn’t retreat now that they had gotten to this point.

“Oh well...the fry pan. Take out the fry pan. You know what that is, right, the flat one?”

“I know that much.”

He put the cabbage into a strainer and put it to the side. He spread three roast pork pieces on the cutting board. He put the edge of the knife in the border between the fat and red meat, then started cutting.

“Break the eggs. You can use that bowl. D-do you know how to break them?”

“More or less. Do I put them all in the same bowl?”

“You can for this.”

He arranged the pork loin he had cut in a row and put a small amount of salt and pepper on them. Then, he scattered flour on them.

“Eek... I already made a mistake breaking the first one...”

He quickly took the bowl holding the broken yolk from beside him and took another egg out of the refrigerator.

“I’ll use this one for the tonkatsu. This is the last egg. If you mess this one up, then we don’t have any more.”

“Oh!”

Leaving fate to heaven, he beat the egg. He pulled out another vat and spread a large heaping of breadcrumbs into it that he had made from cutting apart leftover bread. When he checked from the side of his eye, Taiga had finished her mission of cracking the eggs and hadn’t broken the yolks of any of them. The eggs were floating in the bowl.

“Haah...haah...”

Beads of sweat were already forming on Taiga’s face, and they had only just begun. He covered the pork in egg and moved them to the vat of breadcrumbs.

“Turn on the stove and spread oil on the fry pan. Use that salad oil over there. Enough to cover the whole thing.”

“Haah...haah...”

“Don’t get too excited—calm down. That’s too strong! Turn it down, turn it down! Ahh, I was keeping such good care of that pan, too!”

“H-how?! Oh, like this?!”

She turned the knob to the right towards turning the flame up. Of course, the stove’s flame flared.

“The opposite way, you idiot! The opposite! Go the opposite way!”

“O-oh, the oil—the oil—”

“Nevermind the oil, turn it the other way! The oil doesn’t matter!”

“Uwehh, but I already put in the oil!”

“Then it’s fine! Anyway, the flame! No! That’s the dial for a different one!”

“U-uuuuuw?! Wha?!”

“That’s right! That’s the right one! Spread the oil around! Spread it! Ahhhhh, don’t use wet chopsticks!”

“Wah, hot hot hot! What’s going on with this?!”

She had probably tried to mix the hot oil with the wet chopsticks that had been used to pick up the shredded cabbage. Of course, the liquid splattered out and Taiga jumped away in surprise. *“YA IDIOT! Don’t leave the flame!”* Ryuuji’s voice turned into that of a demonic teacher.

“You rotate the fry pan to get the oil to spread! Do it!”

“Eek! It’s hot, hoot! The oil’s still flying up everywhere!”

“That’s your own fault! Here, put in the eggs! Do it gently, gently!”

“Gyaah! It splattered again! Damn it, I’m gonna diiiiiiieee!”

“You won’t die! You lowered the flame, right?! Then get the lid, the lid! Then get a little bit of water ready! Put it in a cup and keep it ready in one hand!”

“A-a lid?! What lid?! Water?! Huh?! U-uhh, um uh-h-h-h-h-h th-the flame?! The flame... Whaaat?! W-water?! Wh-what do I do with the flame?!”

“The fry pan lid—what other lid would we use?! Whoooooaaaa! What did you do to the flaaaame?!”

“Uwaah! What is this?!”

Fwoosh! The flame of the stove flared again. The synapses in Taiga’s brain connected as her instincts when getting attacked by fire took charge. Fire = danger = turn it off = water, with that association game chain ♪, she gave forth the answer.

“I’ve got it! This is what the water is for!”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOoooooooooooo!”

In front of Ryuuji’s eyes as he yelled, the water that they only needed a little

of in order to bake the eggs at the end went pouring over brim of the cup. It headed toward the fry pan where the egg was bubbling away from too much oil and too much heat.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Whoo!”

SPLAAAAASH! It hit. The rising yellow smoke and liquid made an awful bursting sound. It seemed Taiga had put an ample amount of oil in the fry pan, enough to make a pillar of hellish flame made from oil and water.

Fwuooooooooooooooooaaaaaasssh!

The lid!

Ryuuji threw the chopsticks and the pork into the egg mixture and took the fry pan lid. As though to smother and crush the pillar of fire, he covered it. A spray of heat and an awful noise came at him from inside the iron lid, but he still didn't let the lid leave his hands and turned off the stove. He waited several dozen seconds for the oxygen to burn off.

Several dozen seconds later, Kitamura spoke.

“H-hey. Takasu, Aisaka, are you okay?”

“...”

“...”

The kitchen returned to silence.

By the time Ryuuji noticed, Kitamura had come to stand behind them, looking worried. Ryuuji and Taiga were out of it as they stood silent and stock-still. They looked at each other.

“Whooooooooaaaaa~!”

“Whooooooooaaaaa~!”

They took each other's hands and collapsed right to their knees onto the floor. Kitamura nodded several times as he also went to his knees and put a gentle but worried hand on each of their shoulders.

“Aisaka, you are great at making eggs! Yeah, that was amazing! It was like an

illusion! The flame went up like fwoosh. It almost got to the ceiling... It was really amazing! You're good at it! Amazing, amazing!"

"Haaaah haaaah!"

"Whoaaaaa!"

The panic and fear in Taiga's scream and Ryuuji's rare tears echoed through the Takasu house for a good five minutes. Regardless, the landlady couldn't complain. The two of them had stopped the whole rental from burning down in a crisis...which they had caused.

There was takitate rice with seaweed and tofu miso soup, crunchy and juicy tonkatsu fried pork, a heaping pile of shredded cabbage, pickled radish from a deli he had taken a liking to lately, and...

"No! I feel a strong malicious aura coming from this!"

"What are you saying? You're the one who made them."

Accompanying them at the low table were the eggs, which gave off a smell of charcoal that would have made even the mother hen that laid them go mad. They were crispy and brown all over. The yolks were somehow simultaneously reduced to a fine powder and burnt on top.

Kitamura was sitting across from them. It was already impossible to fix it. Taiga puffed out her cheeks and pulled the plate towards her.

"Okay, okay, fine. I'll eat all of it, then you can't complain, right? Now, put all the ketchup you can on it! Do it!"

"Don't push yourself. You'll get cancer if you eat this burned-to-a-crisp thing. Just eat the edible parts and throw out the rest. It's such a waste, but if you get sick, that'll be even worse in other ways. Kitamura, don't worry about this and just eat the tonkatsu I fried. I'm digging in."

Thanks for the food, they said, following Ryuuji's lead. Taiga said it gloomily as Kitamura gave an invigorating cheer. Then the three of them took up their chopsticks.

"What! Wait!"

“Wh-Whoa?!”

“You put your heart into making these for me, didn’t you, Aisaka? Thanks. You went to all that trouble, so I’m going to eat all of this. Even if you’re good at making something, sometimes it still ends up getting burnt.”

In front of the wide eyes of the two arsonists, Kitamura swiftly took the carbonized stuff on the plate. Though he (more or less) knew what happened, Kitamura still picked up the crispy eggs with his chopsticks and took a bite. He had a wry smile on.

“K-Kitamura-kun...you don’t have to! You can’t have more than that, you’ll get sick! I actually haven’t ever cooked anything before! Sorry for lying about being good at making them!”

“Aha ha! Now that I’ve tried them, they actually taste like eggs! They’re well done! Aha ha!”

He continued stuffing the burned eggs, which couldn’t have tasted good, right into his mouth. Kitamura smiled as though he were having the time of his life.

“R-Ryuuji, oh no...Kitamura’s broken...”

“Keep it together, Kitamura! I’ll get medicine for you right now!”

“No, no, no, I’m fine! I think I’m really lucky, actually. If you weren’t good at making them, they wouldn’t have been anything to scoff at. I’m super lucky for being able to eat a rare Aisaka-made meal.”

How cute.

Ryuuji, of course, wasn’t thinking about the blond boy’s carefree smile.

“Ehee...”

Taiga looked away, turning so pink even her earlobes spoke to her internal body temperature. Her eyes had narrowed into slits.

“R-really? Is it really, actually edible? Is it...”

“Yeah, it’s completely edible. You got the seasoning on the salt and pepper perfect, too.”

“Well, Ryuuji put in the salt and pepper...but but but...ehee hee...I see. I feel a

little more confident. Next time maybe I'll actually try to make it...for real. I thought I'd never be able to cook, but maybe I'll seriously try to learn. Yeah, that's right. I don't want to be undependable forever..."

"If Takasu is your teacher, there's no doubt you'll do it. I'll guarantee it."

"Ehee hee hee hee hee..."

Ryuuji slurped his miso soup, watched the sort-of-happy duo, and avoided adding an unnecessary voice to the conversation. He suddenly felt nostalgic, recalling the intensely salty cookies Taiga had once made in home economics class and messed up trying to give them to Kitamura. In the end, the messed-up cookies had ended up in Ryuuji's stomach. Actually, come to think of it, it had been the love letter destined for Kitamura that Taiga had accidentally given to Ryuuji that had started this strange living situation. The whole affair was ridiculous; Taiga even forgot to put the letter into the envelope.

Right, Ryuuji thought as he saw Taiga's simpering smile, which was filled to the max with embarrassment. The thing that Taiga had wanted to give Kitamura had finally reached him. The messed-up eggs had reached the place they were meant to be from the start—Kitamura's stomach.

"You made them to cheer me up because you were worried that I ran away, right? Really, thank you. You did cheer me up!"

He felt like the emotions in the room were going in a healthy but still slightly odd direction. Taiga's smile, nonetheless, seemed to become even happier, and Kitamura finished the burnt eggs. He grinned and looked at Taiga. The two of them were in a good-enough-for-now state. If they were content for the time being in the same way that he was with Minori, then it was all fine.

He thought that he had been right earlier. Kitamura's weird behavior was moving in a good direction. *And, right, there's also that*—if he only knew why Kitamura had gone blond, it was possible he would be able to settle everything.

"Eat the tonkatsu, too. It's the tonkatsu that has my love for you in it."

"Oh, of course! But I need sauce! Where's the lemon for the cabbage?"

"We're the type who don't put lemon on it."

“Okay! When in Rome!”

Kitamura swiftly put the sauce on the fried tonkatsu and started with the edge where the flavorful fat was. “Hot, hot, hot, owaah! This is good!” Kitamura yelled in delight. Taiga was a little more elegant than usual but had already started stuffing herself with food. Seeing the current mood, Ryuuji asked a casual question.

“Make sure you have the miso soup, too. It’s good for you. Anyway, Kitamura, what’s with that hair?”

“Well...” Kitamura cut himself off to sip the miso soup. “I didn’t want to become the student council president.”

He said it swiftly. That was all he said, as though it were nothing.

“I-I see...”

“That’s all. If I have hair like this, no one’s going to expect that from me, right? Of course, my parents were livid when they saw it.”

Kitamura opened his mouth wide for another bite of the tonkatsu and said over and over, *Hot hot, it’s good, it’s good!* Ryuuji swallowed a little at the sight.

Really?

Did Kitamura really run from the classroom and turn into his imagined model of a “rebel” when the election was mentioned because he didn’t want to be president? Was that really the reason why he had fought with his parents and run away from home?

“Ehee hee! Isn’t that fine?! I think it’s fine if he doesn’t become student president if he doesn’t want to! It’s not like he has to be part of the student council, anyway! Dimhuahua was saying something like that, too!”

Though he wanted to question Kitamura, and felt strangely uneasy, he had to give in when faced with Taiga’s bright, oily smile and improving mood. It might just have been his imagination, but for some reason, the tonkatsu tasted strangely coarse to him.

“Ueeeeeeehhhhhh...nnnnnnnnnnnnngggggghhhhh...I’m home...aaaaaaguh.”

Ryuuji was awakened by the sound of the front door opening.

According to the clock, it was half past three in the morning. Yasuko had come home. The sound of her throwing off her high heels echoed in the entrance, and he heard her footsteps as she stumbled to her room on her own. He thought she might be fine if he left her alone. He tried burrowing once more into his blankets.

“Unyaaaaaaah...”

“Gweh!”

That was the shriek of a woman who was not Yasuko. Ryuuji jumped awake.

He got out of bed in his bare feet and navigated the room’s corners around Kitamura, who was sound asleep on the floor where they had put out a futon. He headed to Yasuko’s room. When he turned on the light, he found the situation was exactly as he had imagined it.

“Fmaah...fmaah...hic...naagh.”

“I-It hurts! She smells like alcohol~!”

Uwah... Ryuuji rubbed his recently awakened eyes and scratched at his head.

Before going out, Yasuko had said this to Taiga: “We’re having friends stay over for once, so you can stay over tonight too, Taiga. ★ You can even put a futon out in my room and sleep there.” So, taking her at her word, Taiga had put out a visitor’s futon next to Yasuko’s and stayed the night.

“Don’t just watch, hurry up and help me! Uwww, the smell is making me drunk, too...”

“O-okay!”

Yasuko, drunk and reeling, had completely ignored her own laid out futon and apparently decided to dive into the futon where Taiga was sleeping. Taiga was wearing an oversized parka and sweats she had borrowed from Ryuuji. Yasuko’s bar-breath was dense enough to stupefy anyone through smell alone. She was

laid out right on Taiga and the futon. She held Taiga's small head and put her cheek against it, mumbling "Nfuu..." Taiga writhed from both the heat of the futon and the alcohol breath.

Ryuuji somehow pulled off the arms that encircled Taiga with a drunkard's brute strength. Then he pulled Yasuko's bottom half off Taiga. Taiga somehow crawled out from the futon and from below Yasuko's completely exposed lace underwear and white butt. Yasuko sloppily stretched out her scantily-clad body.

"Aaater...Ryuu-nyan...I wanna waaaer...cwoold..."

Scritch scratch. Her long nails scratched at the valley of her soft, overflowing chest. Ryuuji, who wasn't the type of son to ogle his own mother doing something like that, was flabbergasted.

"Seriously! How careless can you be..."

Ryuuji yawned widely. Taiga, whose braided, sleeping hair was in messy disarray, seemed to have been infected by Ryuuji's yawn. She also opened her mouth wide.

"Seriously...now I'm awake...fwah."

Chomp. She bit on the too-long sleeve of the parka like a kid.

"So what was Ya-chan saying? Did you decode that?"

"'Water, Ryuu-chan, water please, make it cold.' Right?"

"Couldn't expect less from her son... I want water, too. The barley tea you brewed is cold, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I'm glad I made it before going to bed."

Cold cold, they muttered as the two of them stifled their footsteps, relying solely on the light from Yasuko's room to get to the kitchen. Taiga took out glasses and Ryuuji peeked into the fridge.

"Huh? The tea isn't here... Actually, the pot isn't even here..."

"Oh! This?"

What Taiga had found was the glass pot left next to the sink. It was empty save for the tea bag stuck to the bottom. In this case, the culprit was naturally...

“That Kitamura...he finished it off while we were asleep. Seriously, if he’d just put more water in, it would have been good for another lap. So this is what a jerk who lives comfortably with his parents is like... Ahh, he even used all the ice. Why would he use ice for something that’s been in the fridge? And he didn’t even make more...”

He sighed at the empty ice tray without realizing it. While they were still doing that, Yasuko called out again for “ater pwease.” The Brita water purifier was still full, but he didn’t feel that her drunkenness would be content with room temperature water.

“Oh well... I’m going to run out to the convenience store. It’s closer than the vending machine. Is there something you want?”

“Yogurt! Oh, no, pudding! No, a cream puff! ...An éclair? Sweetened coffee? Ice cream? Uwah, what should I do? I can’t decide at all...”

“Just come with me...”

Ryuuji stuffed his wallet and keys into his sweats. Then he and Taiga stifled their footsteps as they put on their sandals (Taiga borrowed Yasuko’s). They were about to leave the house when Taiga spoke up.

“I’m kind of excited about leaving the house this late... Oh, right, right. Let’s invite Kitamura-kun, too.”

“Isn’t he sleeping?”

“Let’s at least ask him.”

Nodding together, the two of them returned to Ryuuji’s room.

“Ugh! This room smells like boy...”

“Shut up.”

They turned on just the desk light and crouched by Kitamura’s pillow. They could hear him breathe even as he slept with the blankets up to his mouth. Taiga bit on her sleeve and grinned happily.

“Oh ho ho... Kitamura-kun’s sleeping face...”

“You’ve lost sight of the goal, you perverted girl...”

As though they were playing a practical joke straight out of a reality TV show, they sneakily peeled away the blanket. Ryuuji regretted that Minori wasn't there. She definitely would have equipped herself with a mic and helmet and done a, "Good morning!" for them. From inside the blanket Ryuuji peeled off, Kitamura's face, which would have been handsome when he had his glasses off, appeared. He was breathing deeply in his sleep.

But then...

Ryuuji, and then Taiga, knew the reason why the container of barley tea had been empty. They understood why the ice had also disappeared. They went silent, unable to utter a single word or breathe a single breath.

Left by his pillow...no, what had probably dropped from his hand as he slept was melted ice water filling a plastic bag. It had dampened the tatami. He had probably done it over an hour ago to make sure no one would realize the strain he had put on his eyes. The barley tea was for the hydration he had lost.

Kitamura had been crying.

The towel Ryuuji had laid down for Kitamura was visibly wet. Even now, there were traces of the tears on his eyes and cheeks. The towel was against his mouth, and he was biting the edge of it. It was likely that just a short while ago, in the middle of the night when Ryuuji and Taiga had both been deep asleep, he had stifled everything but his tears to keep anyone from knowing.

In the street before dawn, only the sound of their footsteps echoed.

"It's dangerous, so don't go too far."

"..."

A little behind Ryuuji, Taiga walked slowly, dragging her sandals at a speed that was even outpaced by her own white breath.

He had thought they had time until winter actually came, but of course, the air was ice cold in the middle of the night like this. The sidewalk was deserted. They were in a back street where even a stray cat was unlikely to cross their path. There wasn't a single window with a light on. The residences left the two

of them alone and lay quiet, fast asleep. In that silence, he called Taiga's name.

"Taiga..."

Her head was still turned down, and she still seemed like she could stop walking at any moment. Her long hair, which was disheveled from sleep, fell over her cheeks like she was trying to hide them. He couldn't see the expression on her pale face.

Ryuuji took several steps back. He grabbed the hanging sleeve of the too-long parka he had lent her. Taiga didn't try to stop him.

"I...well..."

She finally stopped walking.

"I... What was I so happy about? I was so excited... Aren't I an idiot..."

He could only see the top of her head. Because of the cold, Taiga's shoulders and her voice quivered. Her tone was quiet as it flowed into the night, filled with regret at her own foolishness.

"I didn't even understand anything. I didn't notice. I didn't notice at all...that Kitamura-kun was suffering and sad. I couldn't notice. I'm no good... I'm definitely...no good. I'm no good at all..."

"You're not..."

"I am!"

A drop of liquid fell onto the tips of her sandaled foot, which was probably freezing and smarting from the cold. Ryuuji saw that. The tears that she hadn't even spilled when her father failed her flowed now.

Up until that day, sadness had fallen on Taiga's small form like rain. But Taiga's heart had continued to hold the tears in, like tough soil. Now she had reached her limits, and the water she had been full of came blotting out, slowly and silently. The traces of the tears built up into clear circles on the asphalt.

"This isn't okay..."

The intolerable sobbing echoed in the street before dawn. Ryuuji only held onto the empty sleeve, stood still, and continued to look at the white top of her

head. It was the same for Ryuuji. He couldn't start walking for the same reason.

The sleeve Ryuuji wasn't holding onto covered her still-lowered face. Taiga rubbed it, stifling her voice, and writhed with pain. *If you're no good*, Ryuuji thought, *I'm no good either*. His head felt like it was mostly far away. He didn't have a way to comfort her. He continued to hold the sleeve of Taiga's parka.

Come to think of it, hadn't Ami said it? She had pointed at Kitamura and his bleached head and said "If that guy just so much as cries, someone will come saving him." Ryuuji thought that was exactly the case. Kitamura was strange, serious, sincere, and kind—he was a good person with a lot of qualities people loved. He was "that kind of guy," and because of that, Ryuuji and Taiga, who liked him, wanted to save him. No matter what he did, they wanted to help him. That was exactly as Ami had said. Ami was right to blame Kitamura for being spoiled. They wanted to spoil him out of love. Even if Kitamura was crying because he was aware of that love, there wasn't anything that would change their wanting to save him.

But—now that Kitamura was crying, what could idiots who hadn't even noticed it do?

Even if they wanted to help him, what could idiots who couldn't even hear the sound of his crying do?

What could useless children without a single saving grace do?

He shivered. That had been their last lifeline.

Right as he was reaching a dangerous point, Ryuuji raised his face. He looked up into the dark sky that was still far from dawn. As though in concord with Taiga's faint crying, the constellations that could be found in the polluted winter night of the street were blinking in and out apologetically.



“Taiga, it’s the Big Dipper, those seven stars. That’s Polaris. Orion.”

Look up and see for yourself... There was a song that went like that. Ryuuji hummed just one phrase of the melody and then stuck his hand into the sleeve of the parka he was holding. He held on to Taiga’s cold fingers.

As though surprised, Taiga finally raised her face. Her red nose, her wet eyelashes, and her beautiful face were lit by the streetlamps. She was a mess, but Ryuuji didn’t make fun of her right then. He only pointed at the night sky. If she were looking up, her tears wouldn’t fall.

Taiga, tough as she was, would start walking again. Her tears would fall at times, but she would still be fine.

Ryuuji knew that well. After watching her from the sidelines for several seasons, for countless mornings and nights, while she was smiling, busy, or sad, but never disheartened, even on that day, he knew. He believed in her.

“Which? Which one’s Orion?”

Blowing her nose, Taiga asked, and he answered right away.

“The three stars in a line, it’s that one, right.”

“Oh... I see. I found it.”

She looked up into the freezing sky. Taiga’s fingers gripped Ryuuji’s. She gave them a strong squeeze. Her face was still stained with tears, but he knew the strength had come back into Taiga’s heart. She just needed a little more time before she started walking.

“Didn’t we learn about how far away the stars were in elementary school?” she said.

“Yeah. They’re light-years away.”

“That means the light wouldn’t reach us in that number of years, right? The Orion constellation and North Star and stuff that we’re seeing now might already be dead and gone. If they exploded right now and disappeared, we wouldn’t know it for ten thousand years. The stars we’re looking at now that we believe are there...really might not exist anymore.”

Taiga gripped his fingers even tighter to make sure they were still there. It was as though she were shouting, *I need to hold on tighter, it needs to be tighter, tighter, tighter, tighter! It needs to be even tighter!* That's how much it hurt.

"It's like me and Kitamura-kun. What I'm seeing with my eyes isn't real. In order to know the truth I can't see, I need years, tens of thousands of years. I wonder how far away he is. I wonder what the distance between me and Kitamura-kun is."

"You want to close the distance, right? Because you like him. So you want to understand him."

"Yeah..."

Taiga didn't nod as she answered, still looking up at the night sky. Ryuuji remained next to her and whispered as he looked up at the same stars.

"It's the same for everyone, I'm sure. Everyone gets scared at how far away someone else is, but when they like them, they want to get closer and they both reach out to each other..."

Right. Just like they were now. They were touching each other's skin in order to make sure the faint emotions in their hearts couldn't be lost to the eyes. They were trying to feel every emotion together, whether it was happy or sad.

"You can only reach out to them with your heart. Let's do what we can. Let's go and do what we can..."

I'm scared, he remembered the mutter of a girl.

He also remembered the boy who cried in silence.

Then, while he was thinking of others, he thought about Taiga, whose fingertips he was holding now.

Understanding each other was something like a miracle. For two people to understand each other, and to love each other, was like an unbelievable miracle. All the couples in the world, the friends, the spouses, the children and parents, the siblings—they could all be thought of as miracles. Ryuuji quietly closed his eyes.

It was another hundred more seconds until they could start walking towards the convenience store again.

It was ten thousand more seconds until morning.

Chapter 4

It was the continuation of a dream—even though he needed to get to elementary school, no matter how much he pedaled on his bike, he would go down the wrong streets and never arrive. The despair from the dream melted like a phantom at the faint light coming through a gap in the curtains.

That was right. He was a high school student now. He didn't need to go to elementary school.

It was morning.

"Good morning, Takasu."

"Yo..."

Ryuuji sluggishly stretched his neck and looked at the clock by his head. He tried looking at it, but the shabby clock wasn't in the familiar spot it should have been, and he couldn't figure out the time...

"Huh?!"

He jumped up.

He wasn't in the familiar scenery of his own room but the cramped living room that led into the wooden floors of the kitchen.

"I went ahead and drank the milk in the fridge. Sorry."

It took Ryuuji a good three seconds to remember that the blond runaway currently under their charge, who was wearing the long sleeved T-shirt and tracksuit pants Ryuuji had lent him and whose breath smelled like milk, was Kitamura. *Right, right*—he finally remembered everything and rubbed his sleepy eyes.

"I can't believe you. You two look like you really lived it up on your own. I would have wanted to join in, too. You could have woken me up."

Without thinking, he stared intently at Kitamura's dissatisfied pout.

"Wh-what's wrong?" said Kitamura.

“Nothing... Morning to you, too...”

It was just that you were crying... Of course, Ryuuji couldn't say that. Kitamura's face was cleaned up like nothing had happened. This was probably a point where a man was supposed to pretend not to notice. Ryuuji scratched his head, touching back down into the real world. As he woke up more and understood the situation better, the wrinkles in his forehead deepened all the more.

He became aware that he made a terrible blunder.

The last memory he had was of Taiga dividing the cheese and cod into three pieces and going “Ahhn,” as her tongue coiled around the fish. *Wow, what a weird girl...* he thought. He must have fallen asleep by the table while watching her hands and face.

He had used the floor cushion as a pillow, and his body had cooled to the core, to the point that he was sore in places. The table was in such a terrible state that he felt almost pitiful enough to cry. The stuff they had bought from the convenience store was completely consumed and destroyed. The trash from the cup ramen, oden, plastic bottles, cream puffs, yogurt, and even used disposable chopsticks were scattered around and stinking the place up. *Eek, disposable chopsticks!* It was too late to shudder now. Another tropical rain forest had disappeared!

“Damn it! I can't believe I've shown you how sloppy I've been... I'm pitiful!”

“This stuff is perfectly normal. Cheer up. My room is more or less always like this. When my brother has a mahjong competition with his friends, the whole living room is all cigarette butts and convenience store trash.”

Ryuuji shook his head back and forth fast enough to emit a low-frequency buzz. He was in agony.

“That's not the problem! Even if all the families in the world lived like this from time to time, I can't let our house—I can't let myself live like this! I really wouldn't let any family living on earth do this if I could!”

“I-I see! Sorry!”

“No! Don't apologize! Right now, the reality is that my house is a mess! Okay,

if I don't clean all of this up within thirty seconds, then please, kill me! If you don't, I won't be able to face the earth—whoa!”

“Nnngh...”

When he tried to heave himself up, he noticed something heavy on top of his legs. Actually, he couldn't even feel anything in his cold legs. Taiga was splayed out and using Ryuuji-the-eco-jerk's legs as a pillow as she slept without a care in the world. His circulation had been cut off from the weight of her head. He was past numbness. Around the same time as Ryuuji had fallen asleep, Taiga must have also lost consciousness. She was still holding the cheese and cod in her hand.

The fact that his legs were numb or how they had gotten into this position wasn't the most pressing matter at that moment. Taiga was using another boy's legs as a pillow in front of her unrequited love. It wasn't okay for a maiden to look like this. (He wouldn't get into whether Taiga was a maiden or not at that moment.) Ryuuji grabbed her head in a fluster and shook her back and forth.

“T-Taiga! Wake up, you slob!”

It didn't matter whether she got mad at him or bit him, this was all for Taiga's sake.

“Give it a rest, she's sleeping so peacefully. Don't you have pity for her?”

Making only himself look good without understanding the whole situation, Kitamura stopped Ryuuji's hands and gently cradled Taiga's head to transfer it over to the folded-in-half floor cushion. Taiga, seeming happy, let out a “Nyaah.” Like a cat, she went into a lazy C shape. She started to breathe deeply, soundly asleep once again.

“See, she looks so happy when she's asleep... She really does have a cute face. Her eyelashes are super long.”

“Try telling her when she's awake.”

“That's embarrassing and right on the edge of being sexual harassment. But that peaceful aura she's got when she's asleep... Just seeing it has a sort of curative effect...”

Kitamura was smiling gently as he looked down on Taiga's sleeping face. Ryuuji couldn't say anything to him. *They're the same*, he said to himself.

Just as Taiga and Ryuuji hadn't noticed Kitamura's anguish, Kitamura also didn't notice Taiga's awkward feelings, which stemmed from her overthinking and earnestness. Anyone was like that. Everyone must be like that. But if everyone was like that, it wasn't as though that would comfort anyone, make it better, or reduce their pain.

Ryuuji's stiff shoulder cracked.

"What time is it now? Geh, it's already eleven."

He looked at the clock and was a little surprised. He had thought it was right around nine. He had lost his precious Saturday morning.

"I just woke up, too. We really did sleep in. Oh, come to think of it...take that! Hell car!"

"Whoaaa?!"

Suddenly, Kitamura grabbed Ryuuji with his softball-forged arms and firmly locked Ryuuji's arms and legs. Ryuuji was rolled roughly into the kitchen and his head hit the floorboards. He was overcome by the ridiculousness of it and lay there, splayed out. He even forgot to rightly scold Kitamura and went into silent thought for a while. What in the world was this? Getting violent right after waking up, treating him like this, and having an unreasonable amount of energy—he couldn't think of this as someone who had cried himself to sleep in silence the night before. Because of that, the ennui he felt since that evening all disappeared at once.

"Wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

"Huh? You said once thirty seconds were up that I should execute the death penalty. Oh, you still seem to be breathing."

"Stop it, stop, you idiot! That was obviously a joke!"

"It's not like I'm giving you the death penalty just for show or because I like it! There! We're doing it, giant swing!"

"Ngaaah?!"

“Hold your head, it’s dangerous!”

Then don’t do it! Ryuuji thought. His body had just woken up, and he still couldn’t quickly react. As Kitamura swung him around, he closed his mouth in a fluster. Just as he was told, he held his head. He only had one prayer as he gave up his futile resistance. *If you’re doing it, hurry up and end it already. How did it come to this... Oh, it’s because I’ve destroyed the environment.* He would endure the pain as a representative of the foolish human race. It would be a rescue signal coming from the Spaceship Earth... He was warming to the idea of being a martyr, but right when he closed his eyes, he was flung in a direction he wasn’t expecting.

“Whooaaaaa!”

He hit the sliding door that separated the living room and Yasuko’s room. At the edge of his vision, he saw Kitamura flying off to the side and rolling cleanly away as he yelled, “Daaah!”

Then, the one who should have been sleeping peacefully acted.

“...Uw...uw...”

With no mercy for her unrequited love, she sent him flying with the heel of her palm. The one who had tried to dispose of the criminal with a giant swing was sent rolling away so that she alone was standing.

Her messy light hair rose and fell with her breath. Under her eyelids, her eyes were swollen from crying right before sleeping. They shone an ominous red from the saltiness of her tears. She staggered, and he knew that her atrocities had resulted from her just having woken up.

She probably still hadn’t even seen the two shaking boys who couldn’t speak up from fear. She stood imposingly, like a half-asleep beast that had been allowed to stand on two legs. Her eyes glistened like she had been born without reasoning. She turned to the ceiling and looked up at the moon that, of course, wasn’t there. Then, *snap*, she broke the invisible chin restraints around her and showed off her very real gums. She clenched her fist, which was still covered in fish, and roared like a beast.

“YOOOOOOUUUUUU’RRREEE NOOOOOOIIIIIISSSSYYYY!”

So this was a so-called evangelion... Actually, it was the Palmtop Tiger.

“Kuh...she’s awake now...”

Kitamura knelt in front of the violent, half-asleep girl. He put his hands up and narrowed his eyes as though she were blinding. Incidentally, there was nothing bright in the apartment at all. They didn’t get good natural light because of Taiga’s condo, and they only had a dim light on. For the moment, Ryuuji left the high-spirited Kitamura behind and crawled all the way to the kitchen.

“Taiga...Taiga. Come over here. Now...”

“Uh...?”

“Look...your favorite. It’s nice and cold... It’s blueberry flavored...”

“Uh-uh...”

He opened the refrigerator and showed the contents to the rampaging, sleepy tiger. What he pulled out was what they had bought the last night, or rather that morning, when they had gone to the convenience store. It was a Meiji Bulgarian yogurt drink that she hadn’t already consumed.

Taiga slowly but surely hobbled towards Ryuuji. Her eyes had only one focus—the cold yogurt drink.

“Now, drink. You can drink it all, it’s all yours.”

“Uh...uuuh...? ...Uh!”

Schwoop! Her small hand grabbed it. *Psht.* She thrust the straw into the drinking hole. Her teeny mouth greedily sucked and, *sluurp!* She drained the contents. As her throat made noises, her eyes gained a spark of logic that was more human.

“Ah~! That was good! Another!”

Finally, she spoke in a human language.

“We don’t have any more.”

“What?! Cheapskate! Then give me milk!”

“Sorry, Aisaka, I just drank it all.”

“Huh?! Wait, what right do you have to my dairy—kyah!”

Don't scream, Ryuuji thought. He was exasperated as, before his eyes, Taiga finally woke up and realized the situation.

“K-K-K-Kitamura-kun?! Uwah! Noo! Gyaah! N-no way, you didn't see me when I wasn't decent, did you?!”

At this point, she hastily rubbed at her mouth with her sleeve...or rather, with the sleeve of Ryuuji's parka.

“Sorry, I did, but it's your fault for sleeping in a place like this, Aisaka.”

“Noo, what do we do, Ryuuji?! I'm so embarrassed I could die! I can't believe he saw me! He saw me while I was sleeping! While I was sleeping!!”

“Seeing you asleep aside, do you even know what you did to Kitamura with your hand... Well, it doesn't matter...”

“No no no no no no no no no no, I didn't want this to happen!”

Now that she was feeling shy after her unrequited love had seen her sleeping and after she had hit him as hard as she could, Taiga tried hiding behind Ryuuji's back. Embarrassed, unseemly, and making a scene, she flailed and stamped her feet.

“No, I don't like this, it's the worst! The worst! My hair's even all messed up like this!”

Screaming, she jumped into Yasuko's room. She slammed the sliding door shut and probably jumped into the empty sheets next to Yasuko. Now she could reflect on her embarrassment over her klutziness.

“Making a scene... She's an idiot.”

“Well, it was a really good palm strike, and really powerful. I feel like it cleared my head.”

Together, they both folded their arms and nodded chummily, unaware of the tremendous shock rearing up into their view.

“Whoa?!”

“Uh...”

The sliding door opened, and the human silhouette that appeared could only be compared to the Yamato Transport cat, the Nippon Express pelican, or the Sagawa Express guy. She firmly held a package in one hand, but instead of a piece of mail, it was Taiga. Her hair was half up; she'd mussed it in her sleep so that it blasted to the side. Her mascara had melted into her sweat as she slept so that her under-eye was black and her eyebrows were thin. The remnants of her foundation were oily and slick, but her skin itself was dry and wrinkly, like a crêpe. She might have been cold—she was wearing Ryuuji's junior high tracksuit top on top of her black lace camisole—but the ends of her unhooked bra stuck out from under the hem. Her bottom was still barely covered with a miniskirt, but the zipper was half undone on the very front of it. Her easy-breezy hot pink underwear greeted them.

This was, astonishingly, Ryuuji's own mother.

“ ... ”

Plunk. Yasuko wordlessly flung Taiga onto the floor. Still with her eyes half-closed, she pulled over the Chanel bag next to her pillow and opened her feng shui wallet, which was yellow for prosperity.

“ ... ”

She took out three thousand-yen notes. She pushed one at each of the three children.

“ ... ”

Very simply, she motioned at the door with her thumb.



In order not to disturb the sleep of the breadwinner of the house, who disappeared behind the sliding door once again after her hangover, Ryuuji sneakily cleaned up, Kitamura took a quick shower, and Taiga quietly walked home to her condo to shower and change.

Now then. With a budget of one thousand yen each, if they were going to stay out of the house as long as possible, that meant...

“I apologize. Because it is busy, we cannot split any checks! In sum, the Italian hamburger steak and rice drink set, the mushroom rice porridge with a fountain drink, the single avocado salad, the pumpkin sweet potato chiffon cake, the rich chocolate cake, all together is three thousand three hundred thirty yen! Thank you for the ten-thousand-yen bill! I’ve received a ten-thousand-yen bill! Please check it! Okaaay! Here is the largest bill, five thousand yen, and six thousand yen back! And six hundred, eighty-seven yen for your change! Please check it, here’s the receipt! Thank you for coming, please come again! Welcome! The smoking section is full, so we can seat you in nonsmoking by the window, I can lead you th-th-th-th-th-whooooaaaa! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“You’re slow, Minorin...” said Taiga.

“You didn’t notice us at all,” said Ryuuji.

“Why do some places lead you to the seats and other places don’t?” said Kitamura. “I always wonder about that.”

In order to avoid disturbing Yasuko after changing and taking refreshing showers, the three of them headed out to eat brunch at the usual family restaurant where Minori always worked.

“Well, it’s lunchtime, so Minori the human is off, and I’m devoting myself to being Minori the cool waitressing machine, so—Kitamura-kun?! Wait, wait, how are you showing up here like nothing’s going on?! I was worried this whole

time! What's with that hair?!"

"Sorry. A ton of things happened, and I'm running away to Takasu's home right now."

"You ran away, of course a lot of things must have happened! Seriously, you look like you're fine! Okay, I feel a little better!"

"Sorry for making you worry."

Kitamura scratched apologetically at his blond head. He looked a little rougher than usual now that he was borrowing Ryuuji's parka and sweats and didn't have his usually well-groomed dark head with his full-on Uniqlo casual look. Taiga gave it full points.

"Minorin, you're still not done working? We'll wait for you while we're eating, so let's go out together!"

Taiga had layered a bunny-like fluffy white cardigan over a frilly pink flower print dress. The lace underskirt added additional volume. She was probably trying to recover from Kitamura seeing her pitifully asleep, so she had even put on a faint beige pink lip-gloss and started acting cute. Ryuuji, who was just thankful she hadn't gotten the lip gloss up her nose, was in his usual zip-up parka and jeans. His eyes lit up ominously as Minori-the-waitress with a ponytail tilted her head and hummed.

"Oh, I can't. My shift is from eleven all the way right through eight today. Sorry, but just leave me behind. Please take this seat."

"What~?! Seriously, that's too bad..."

That's too bad for me, too... he thought as he looked at the thin nape of Minori's neck while she led them to their seats. Ryuuji's shoulders drooped slightly.

"In my place though, why don't you invite the girl sitting next to you?"

As she led them to the window table, the three of them looked in the direction Minori pointed. Then, all of their eyes widened at once.

The girl was sitting by herself at a nonsmoking seat. She had white earphones on to shut out outside noise. In one hand she was fiddling with an iPod, while

the other twirled pasta. Her shining, beautiful face was like a flower in full blossom but emotionless; she looked bored. She completely ignored the occasional heated gaze as though it were nothing. She went without makeup and wore a turtleneck sweater, jeans, and ballet flats. If anyone but a true beauty had worn the same thing, they would have been on a full speed course toward looking like a simple old hag, but she had the perfect proportions of a model on vacation. When she was just sitting there, the neighborhood family restaurant felt like a Paris café, and all the other guests' faces seemed hazy and indistinct.

At that beautiful girl—at Kawashima Ami having her lonesome Saturday lunch—Taiga's lip curled unpleasantly.

"Oh, my my my, who could I have thought it was other than Dimhuahua? You kind of seem sad, don't you? It's Saturday and you're all alone eating noodles."

She went immediately into picking-a-fight mode, but Ami was in the middle of listening to a song and didn't notice Taiga's words. She brought the salad to her mouth as she kicked her ballet flats in rhythm with the music and continued looking away.

"Oh, could you not hear me? Hey, Dimhuahua! Hey, you, the one who's got the day off and hasn't even got work and is eating all alone!"

"..."

She still didn't notice. Kitamura stepped right in to stop Taiga from saying anything more embarrassing. He was always sweet and kind to his childhood friend, and had almost always behaved like an older brother for her—

"Hey, you lazyhead! You lazyhead! You out of work model lazyheaaaad!"

"K-Kitamura? What's gotten into you?" Ryuuji stuttered.

"Ami's a lazyhead, she's an unknown with an empty schedule! A sad, dried up model!"

"That's right, that's right, Dimhuahua is a lazyhead! A lazy model! Lazyhuahua!"

Taiga, synching her voice with Kitamura's, started to chant. *Lazyhead!*

Lazyhead! Eventually, their shouting started getting into a rhythm.

“Lazyhead of the people... ♪.”

“Well! Of course Kitamura-kun’s got a great voice! He’s so smart!”

The blond idiot and idiotic tiger seemed happy as they clapped. Right next to Ami, who noticed nothing, they danced like cartoon tooth decay bacteria, shouting and grinning. Even Minori scowled, “Wh-what’s going on with you?! Kitamura-kun, that’s not funny at all! Did your blond head take away your sense of humor?”

“No, Kitamura wasn’t that funny in the first place... Actually, someone’s asking for you over there.”

Oh no. She donned her waitress face again and went to get the order. Ryuuji watched her as she went. Come to think of it, he figured out the reason why Kitamura had attacked Ami. The bombing Ami had given him in the interview room was probably eating away at him. Kitamura, who wasn’t a saint that would let things go without a fight, had just found in Taiga a partner for the berate-a-thon.

“I don’t have any work, so I’m out of stuff to do. ♪”

“I don’t have any! Of my favorite modeling work! So I’m eating! Lunch all by myself! Aaaaaah...oooooh...aaaaaaah...oooooh... If you don’t have any work, get into business, onyanyanyanyaeeeeiiijyah. ♪”

“Don’t act all lazy! Why don’t you quit modeling?! Then you can be as lazy as you please! Eating lunch, dillydallying by yourself! You’ve got nothing to do! Nothing! Nothing! Ohoo! By yourself! By yourself! By yourself! Oho ho ho ho ho ♪.”

They were making fun of her in song, a new genre of parody. Taiga cackled like the loyal familiar of an evil sorcerer. She used Ami’s napkin in place of a mic, stuck out her butt, and swayed from left to right.

“You’re loud,” said Ami. “I’m pretending not to hear you, you idiot!”

“Eeek!”

She threw her cold drink into one of their faces. Actually, Ami had drank most

of it and the remainder was mostly ice, so the victim only got some of their cheek and chin wet, but it was probably cold as death. Kitamura's face went pale; he desperately scraped the ice out of his collar. Next she targeted Taiga.

"I said I heard everything from the start! Pretend we don't know each other, you airhead!"

"Ow!"

Ami was hitting her with the empty cup. Her cup was easily stolen by someone beside her.

"Ahh, you're adding to my workload during lunchtime! The floor's wet now!"

"But~! It's because Yuusaku and this shrimpy tiger were being too noisy~!"

"Okay, okay, don't fight and get to your seats! Ahmin, sit over there with them. This seat's wet, so I'll wipe it down! Now, get out of the way. Hey, get your butt up, girl!"

Minori, three times more intense than her normal work mode, followed them briskly while wielding a mop. In the end, the four of them ended up sitting together at a window seat. Minori finished transferring the half-eaten pasta, salad, and check from Ami's table in a quick second.

"Now, once you've figured out your order, just call for me! I'll get you a ton of fries on the house!"

She said the second half so other customers couldn't hear. Then with movements to rival a swan fluttering on a lake, she elegantly left three lunch menus lined up on the table.

"Actually, I don't want to sit with any of you!"

"Ohh, look at that," said Ryuuji, "they say it's a mushroom special...with mushroom porridge, mushroom sauce hamburg steak, mushroom-loaded Japanese style pasta, wah, they even have a mushroom and oyster cream doria! And it's low calorie! If I get this, maybe I can have a dessert, too..."

"Are you planning on getting dessert here, too?" said Taiga. "Didn't you just say earlier that you wanted to go to the café in the station building?"

"S-something warm...something that'll warm me up! It's cold! I'm gonna die!"

“How about mushroom porridge?”

“Do the mushroom porridge.”

“No one’s listening! This is why I don’t want to sit with these guys!”

Keh! Ami haphazardly finished off her remaining pasta, making a show of her apathy. She had a scowl on her beautiful face as she looked away.

“I got it. I’ll have demi-glace sauce on omelet rice. With a fountain drink, it’ll be under 1000 yen. So, Kawashima, why are you alone today? You don’t have work?”

Now Ami also glared at Ryuuji, who had gently turned the conversation towards her.

“I took the time off! I’m human, so I get days off when I want!”

“What are you suddenly snapping at me for?”

“Right, it’s scary. Dimhuahua is in a bad mood.”

“Ami’s got a bad personality, regardless of her mood.”

“Shut up! Don’t get cocky—you in particular, straw-head! Anyone would be in a bad mood if you were singing about them being lazy! Seriously, what are you saying, you have a problem with me eating alone on a Saturday?!”

No no, I don’t, each of them thought as their eyes dropped to the menus. Ami, seeming displeased, crossed her legs loftily.

“Hmph... We’re still in high school; if I don’t take a day off, then I’m a failure as a pro. I can study for tests and go to the spa or the gym because I have days off. Right, before I came here, I didn’t just do photography. I did cover rotations, too. I did so many that it was like, ‘What, are you fine with having me do it again~?’ I was too busy to get a break... Oh, right, right! If that stalker jerk hadn’t appeared and I hadn’t had to take a break for a full two months, I would have gotten my turn on the cover this month! Actually, I haven’t been on the cover once since taking a break?! What’s the meaning of that?! Are they saying that if my face is on the cover, magazines don’t sell?! Damn it... They’re underestimating me... Damn it!”

It seemed the lazyhead attack had really been a land mine. Now that

someone had stepped on it, it was out of their hands. Ryuuji sat next to Taiga, who was sitting across from Ami. Ami's mouth contorted in irritation as she nibbled her lettuce.

"Dimhuahua...it's fine. You can ask for a fountain drink—my treat. How pitiful. I didn't know you'd sunk so low that you can't afford a two hundred eighty yen fountain drink..."

Taiga purposefully put on a pained expression and held her chest.

"I'm not drinking water because I don't have money!" Ami's voice was practically a shriek. "Water is the best thing for a detox! I'm drinking water on purpose, you stupid shrimpy tiger! Ahh, this is no fun! I'll take you up on the offer! If it comes to it, I'll actually take you up on your treat!"

Though she had snapped, she roughly stood up and stormed off to the fountain drinks. Ryuuji watched Ami, flustered.

"Hey, hey! You have to order it first!"

He waved his hand and called on Minori while she was working.

"Omelet rice,"

"Mushroom oyster doria,"

"Mushroom porridge...and four fountain drinks."

Since they didn't have any bags that could be taken, the whole group got up and, like impalas gathering at water, headed to the fountain drinks.

"So, once we finish eating, where do we want to go?"

"Right... Even though I'm embarrassed to admit it, I ran away, so I don't have any money. I'll probably use all the money Yasuko-san gave me just eating here so...ahh, it's cold! Coffee, coffee!"

"A place that isn't too cold would be good. I'd be fine just seeing Minori here for a while. Huh, the giant clothespin thing to grab the ice isn't here."

"You mean the tongs. It's over here, so give me your glass and I'll get it. Kawashima, how about you? Is there someplace you want to go?"

"Uhh, the ones with zero calories are...huh?! Since when?! Why are you

counting me in your group?!”

“You don’t have anything to do anyway, do you? To be honest, Kitamura-kun seems more cheerful with you around. I don’t like it, but I’ll allow you to be with us. Work with us to make Kitamura-kun happy.”

“W-wait a second. You really think that Yuusaku cheered up? Actually, didn’t I say I didn’t want to be involved with Yuusaku? Seriously, do none of you get anything that I say?”

“You’re already involved. Just look at that face of his...because you splashed him with ice water, even his lips are blue, how sad...”

“Well, isn’t he getting his just desserts?”

As though to resonate with their fight in the already busy family restaurant at lunch, the place became even noisier.

For the time being, they put aside their selfish wants to concentrate on how to cheer up Kitamura. They would do anything to accomplish that.

That was where Taiga’s new determination was focused as she ate her éclair. Of course, Ryuuji had also been in the same state of mind before daybreak at four in the morning. They vowed that they would do what they could for Kitamura as they gorged themselves.

But.

“What was that about a vow?” said Ryuuji.

“H-he looks happy...at least...” said Taiga.

“You go do something...”

“Why don’t you?”

They sat side by side on the cold bench. In front of their eyes, past the old green net, they watched the development of two childhood friends’ antagonistic time together.

“Missed again! You’re missing at 70 kilometers, Ami. Are you underestimating the ball?! Why aren’t you actually going for it?! Why are you so embarrassed

about giving your all in front of people?! When did Japan get like this?!”

“I am giving it my all! For starters, it’s the first time I’ve held a bat, so of course I can’t do it! I only came because you’re the one who kept saying you wanted to go in the first place, but why am I the one swinging?! You could do it yourself!”

“Everyone is equal at the plate! The plate is always there! The batter stands in front of the batter box because that’s where the plate is! And then they hit it! Every person is an equal batter in front of the plate! Look, watch your front! Here it comes, look, it’s coming, look closely, look look look, hey hey hey! If you’re not paying attention, it’ll hit you!”

“Huh?! W-wait, wait wait, huh...take that?!”

Fwoom! She swung the bat wildly for a fifth miss. Kitamura camped out in front of the handling panel, acting like some arrogant coach as he roughly shook his blond head.

“What are you doing?!”

He stomped his feet out of frustration.

“Look! I just said to watch the ball carefully, didn’t I?! Why can’t you even do something that simple?!”

“Your babbling distracted me!”

“Kushieda could easily hit one hundred forty kilos one after another and she’s a girl!”

“It’s because Minori-chan’s been a baseball girl since she was little! Ah! Ow! That hurt! You just hit me in the butt with a bat, didn’t you?!”

“You’re not getting things done, so I gave you some motivation! Look, it’s coming again! This time, keep a good eye on it and go get it!”

“Hey, Takasu-kun, did you see that?! Just now, this guy hit my butt with a bat, right?!”

I saw it, I saw it, it really was a bat butt—Ryuuji nodded. *Aah.* He held his knees as he sat on the bench. The shabby batting center with one plate was set up in a corner of the golf practice range. Maybe because there was no sunlight,

or maybe because of the cold, bare concrete, or maybe due to the ferocity that filled the air, it felt even colder than walking outdoors. Taiga held her legs in the same pose, sniffing and looking bored.

When Kitamura said he wanted to go to the batting center, they thought he must have wanted to get in an active mood. They thought it was a good, healthy proposal, and everything went fine until they arrived. Since then, Kitamura had had Ami stand at the plate the whole time and devoted himself to gratingly and gloomily coaching her. He might have been in good spirits in that sense, but in Ryuuji's eyes, Kitamura was going straight down a path in the direction entirely opposite to healthy.

"Do you feel like Kitamura's personality has changed or something?" he said.

"You were like that when you were showing me how to make eggs," said Taiga.

"Anyone would be worried when the house was close to burning down..."

"Oh. Dimhuahua got one."

Babaam. By coincidence, Ami's bat got in its first proper hit. But the ball, like the sound, traced an off-kilter line straight up and dropped a few meters ahead.

"Hmph... That's a weak fly ball. Good, it's at least passable! You got it up in the air!"

"Why are you so uppity..."

At last released, Ami turned over the net and was successfully repatriated to the outside. She thrust the bat in her hands at Taiga.

"Here, you're the next victim. Careful, that's a genuine demon of a teacher. He's abnormal. Ahh, I can't humor him anymore."

Who's next?! I'll teach you, so hurry up and get here! The demonic coach's voice made Taiga hesitate a little, and she looked at Ryuuji.

"Go ahead," he said. "Let him give you a good coaching."

"Okay... Right. Right! Kitamura-kun, I'm next up to bat!"

Taiga took off her cardigan, put up her hair, and turned up the net. She had

more than enough fighting spirit as she stood at the plate. Taiga was also a beginner at batting, but she faced the ball with a wide, straight swing. The way she held her left arm, even in her dress, made her seem like she had been possessed by the living spirit of Ichiro himself. Suzuki Taiga had come onto the scene.

“Okay! First, we’ll do a seventy kilo! We’re going, Aisaka!”

“Okay!”

At around the same time, Ami sat down next to Ryuuji as she combed through her messed up hair with her fingers to fix it. A brisk sound went off, and Taiga’s bat suddenly made contact with the first ball right on a sweet spot. The ball mostly flew straight off, nearly hitting a round target on the opposite wall. *Whoa*. Ryuuji applauded automatically.

“Amazing,” Ami said. She didn’t actually seem interested at all.

“Huh, I hit it? Is this okay? It seems kind of too easy. Kitamura-kun, maybe I can do it a little faster.”

Her frilly dress swayed. Kitamura turned to her with glittering eyes.

“Yeah...I might have discovered a diamond in the rough! Whoa, Aisaka! You’re exceptional. Why didn’t you join the softball club?!”

“It was because I had my fill of sports clubs in junior high. Is my grip fine like this?”

“Let me see, yes, yes, that’s good! I didn’t even show you and your grip is perfect! Amazing, Aisaka, you have outstanding reflexes!”

“Well, I don’t compare to Minorin.”

Ehee hee. Taiga became incredibly shy, and her face turned peach pink as she smiled. Kitamura seemed to be having fun, too—it was fine as long as he was having a good time, wasn’t it? This time, Ryuuji rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands to make sure he was reading Kitamura’s expression correctly.

“Hey, Takasu-kun, I’m kind of bored. And it’s cold here... Do you want to go get something warm to drink?”

Ami’s white fingertip tickled him slightly. Her large, upturned eyes glistened

as she instantaneously sidled up to him. Before he knew it, she had taken his arm and was right on him.

“Can we?”

Ami ever so slightly pouted her charming cherry-glossed lips and tilted her head. Her brown, clear eyes reflected Ryuuji’s face. They quavered invitingly, as though trying to transport him to another world. Incredibly, they made his common sense waver.

“Okay, let’s go...”

“H-huh?”

He didn’t even push Ami away or get mad, but simply stood straight up. Ami was the one who had exclaimed in surprise. She looked up at Ryuuji as though she were disappointed, and her eyes glinted as though searching for something. He beckoned for her to stand.

“What, you invited me. There’s a vending machine by the front desk, so let’s go.”

“You’re kind of different from usual. That’s weird... What are you scheming?”

“I’m not scheming anything. I’m not like you, and that’s rude.”

“I’ve never schemed at anything. Well, I guess we can do whatever.”

Ami’s eyes narrowed, and she stared back at Ryuuji for a moment. Then she got up.

“If they’re doing that, we’ve got our own things to do.”

She grabbed Ryuuji’s arm. She clung tight, practically hanging off of him.

“Hey...wait!”

The smell that wafted to his nose was of a sweet flowery perfume.

“Oh my, what’s wrong? Did something as small as that fluster you? Are you really prepared for this?”

Their heights weren’t that different, so Ami’s pale face was practically adhered to Ryuuji’s neck. Even if he tried to run away, her arm was firmly locked to Ryuuji’s elbow and wrist. They were snuggled right up to each other

like lovers.

“We’re going to take a little break~!”

“Right! Look, Aisaka, the hundred kilo is coming!”

“Yeah! ...Yeah?!”

The statement went right past Kitamura, who was feverishly coaching Taiga. Taiga, however, opened her eyes wide in surprise for a moment at the nestled-up duo. Because of that, she turned back late and spectacularly missed the easy straight ball.

No, no, that’s not it, Ryuuji thought. He desperately shook his head and made eye contact with Taiga. He had thought they would disappear to give Taiga and Kitamura some pleasant time alone together. Kitamura was in a good mood with Ami around, but the dark energy that emanated from her drew attention. That was why he was going along with Ami’s mischievous behavior for once.

As she pulled Ryuuji’s arm, Ami turned to Taiga and happily stuck out her tongue. “Nah nah.”

“...!”

Taiga stood stock-still and got a second strike. In this crisis, an even hotter fire burned in the eyes of coach Kitamura.

“Ho ho ho, now we’re alone together. ♥ Just kidding...”

Once they closed the door of the reception area that shared space with the golf practice field, Ami practically sent Ryuuji flying when she threw away his arm. “Hmph,” she snorted. He had thought it would end like this, so he wasn’t surprised.

“Heh,” he said. “I can see through your behavior now. It’s not fun clinging to me without Taiga around, right? Look, sit over there. I’ll buy the drinks.”

“I’m buying my own, so it’s fine. Ahh, this is really boring.”

Ami indifferently turned her pretty face away and walked quickly, trying to outpace Ryuuji. As he watched her narrow shoulders, Ryuuji, who was always

the victim, felt mischief brewing in his heart.

“What? If you’re going to cling to me, do it right.”

“Eek?!”

From behind, he grabbed her shoulders and, copying her, immediately overtook Ami.

“Eek. But. Eek!”

Ami actually seemed surprised as she turned and jumped away. He pointed teasingly at her. He was always the one being made fun of, getting flustered, and being toyed with. Giving it back every once in a while could be fun.

Ami’s mouth was still open. She was turning red either from the anger or the humiliation of someone like Ryuuji scaring her.

“I...I can’t believe you! Fine, I’ll have you treat me to drinks!”

Standing imposingly, she pointed at the old paper-cup-type vending machine. The seventy-yen sticker price and the establishment from a bygone era was enough to laugh at.

“Right, what do you want?”

“Melon soda.”

“Are you sure? Should a model really be drinking a lump of sugar like that?”

“It’s fine! Leave me alone! Seriously, you have me all riled up, sticking your nose into my business!”

He bought Ami’s melon soda and a coffee for himself and sat at the shabby eating area’s single counter.

“Don’t be so irritated,” he said.

“I’m leaving you alone, aren’t I? Don’t even talk to me. Don’t even look at me.”

It seemed he had really made her angry. She put her cheek on her hand on the counter. Her entire body was turned away from him as she sipped the carbonated beverage that was blatantly artificial in color. Such a harsh aura wafted in his direction along with her faint perfume that even Ryuuji was

uncomfortable.

“I said I’m sorry. It was a joke. You’re the one who’s always messing around with me by clinging to me.”

“It’s not that... It’s fine.”

“What? What is it?”

“It’s fine now. There’s a lot to it. You wouldn’t understand anyway.”

Turned to the wall, Ami spat the words out, and with that, ended the conversation. She snipped the conversation short by punctuating it with a forceful period. Though Ryuuji acknowledged he had been ignored, he tried moving the conversation forward, just a little forcefully. They had the time anyway.

“By there being a lot to it...do you mean work not going well and us spoiling Kitamura and me getting on your nerves? Is it all the little things adding up that’s irritating you?”

Ami unexpectedly gave him a curt reply, though she was still looking at the wall.

“No... That’s not it. It’s not as simple as that.”

In Ryuuji’s head, it was like pulling on a string. He felt like Ami wanted to tell him something more than what she actually said. But he didn’t know which string would pull it out. Just as Ami said, it really did seem it wasn’t that easy.

“You’re a complex girl after all, Kawashima. Whenever I try to understand you fully, I always run into trouble.”

“If you’re not even willing to deal with that much trouble, I won’t humor you. Well, there is some value to making things a little difficult, right?” She spoke arrogantly, roughly pushing up her long hair. Finally, Ami glanced at him. Her gaze was as cold as usual. It was a lot more comfortable having her look at him than at the wall. He felt a little better.

“Well, you’re not the only one who’s hard to read. Take Kitamura, for example. He said the reason why he did that to his hair was because he doesn’t want to be the student council president. He said if he rebelled like that, no one

would expect anything out of him. What do you think, Kawashima? Do you think that's true?"

Huuuh? Ami's pale face finally turned towards Ryuuji straight on.

"Like I said, whether it's true or not, Yuusaku is expecting *someone* to think that for him... Actually, never mind. I said I don't want to be involved with that stuff. Don't go reporting all the dirty details to me. Being with Yuusaku like this is already idiotic enough as it is."

That was when it happened. Suddenly, an incredibly loud siren started blaring from inside the door that partitioned them from the batting center.

"Whoa?!"

"Wh-what?!"

It sounded like it could have been an emergency drill or an actual fire alarm. Ryuuji and Ami stood up in surprise at pretty much the same time. The old ladies behind the reception desk seemed in a leisurely mood. They were merrily saying, "Well," and, "Oh my, oh my." A fifty-year-old looking old lady with super thick makeup heaved out a large package.

"Congratulations!"

"You got it, congratulations!"

"Who was it that hit it?!"

The workers started applauding.

"She's the one who hit it! Isn't it amazing?! And she's just a beginner!"

Happily flaring his nostrils, the fervent coach who appeared pointed with a radiant smile at the diamond in the rough, Taiga. Taiga's smile twitched with embarrassment; she stood frozen in the congratulatory calls. The makeup-wearing lady forced an idiotically huge stuffed animal that would obviously be a nuisance to lug anywhere into Taiga's hands. It looked somewhat like a certain mouse that they had seen somewhere else before, with some differences. There was a ribbon around its neck that read, "Celebrating a big home run!"

Ryuuji approached Taiga and couldn't help but ask what had happened. "Wh-what did you do?!"

“Uhh...it looks like I hit something. When I really went for the ball, I hit it right on the target, and then suddenly the siren went off...”

“Isn’t it amazing that something like this happened?! Aisaka is a genius! Unlike Ami! She did it, she did it! A home run!”

“I don’t need genius like that anyway. Seriously...”

She gloomily looked back at Kitamura’s face as he became happier and more worked up. Ami, seeming exasperated, chugged the rest of her soda. Taiga asked Kitamura, “You want it?” She handed him the stuffed animal and Kitamura took it while jumping for joy.

Ryuuji felt the need to check in with the makeup lady.

“Is a big hit something that’s really good?”

“No? We generally have two in a month.”

“I see...”

“You’ve got eyes like a raptor... Hey, everyone, take a look at this kid, he’s got raptor eyes.”

“Oh, it’s true.”

“Well now, he sure does.”

“No way, let me see.”

“A raptor? That’s a snake! He’s got snake eyes!”

Kitamura was so elated by everything that Ryuuji was fine with this. The faces of the powdered-up grannies surrounded him and Ryuuji became a slightly stronger kid.

Eventually, the sun started to slant, and the wind was surprisingly cold. The three of them that were returning to the Takasu house, and Ami, started going down separate roads when it happened.

“Ohh. ★ What a surprise, what a coincidence~!”

“Oh, how unexpected.”

Coming from down the road was a makeup-free Yasuko, whose skin cells had seemingly revived. She might have been out shopping, since she held bags from a drug store and was wearing clothes that were worn out but seemed a bit better than Ryuuji's tracksuit. She happily approached them. Then she caught sight of Ami's face.

"Oh my, Ryuu-chan, you've got another friend~! Uhh, you were definitely around once before, too? It's nice seeing you again~! Oh, this is great, I bought four puddings, too~! Let's all eat them at home. I'm an adult, so I don't need one!"

"Wah, it's so nice seeing you again! But I'm just about to go home. I'm leaving for today."

Ami, who had on her goody-two-shoes mask, tried to quickly sneak home as though she were avoiding trouble.

"Ryuu-chan! You stop her! I need a little more help!"

"Huh? Wh-what?"

"Just hurry~!"

Unusually fast for her, Yasuko sneakily whispered an order into Ryuuji's ear and mommy's boy couldn't not do what he was told. He quickly went after Ami.

"Haah~? Why do I have to stop by your house?"

He had to appease her suspicion with a, *Well, anyway, there's pudding*. He somehow got her to come to their house, even though he didn't know the real reason why he was doing it.

Then...

"Mwa ha ha ha ha ha..."

It was when they were all peacefully surrounding the table and had finished the pudding Yasuko had given them that they understood her true intentions. Ryuuji, Taiga, Ami, and then Kitamura opened their eyes wide and looked up at Yasuko as she appeared in the living room.

Her tracksuit bottoms were pulled up to the knees. She had an old apron on over her T-shirt. She wore floppy plastic gloves on both hands. What she was

holding in those hands was...

“Ryuu-chan! Now! Hold Kitamura-kun~!”

“R-right!”

...a black package that read, “Make any color super pitch black in one go! The strongest black hair dye for men!” Around the same time Ryuuji understood the situation, Kitamura also gathered the danger and leapt up like a vaulting horse.

“Taiga! Hold him!”

“Huh?! O-okay!”

“Kawashima, get around to the front door and block it!”

“Huh, this is what you wanted to do in the end~? Okay okay, seriously...”

From the back, Ryuuji pinned Kitamura’s arms and Taiga held Kitamura’s struggling legs from the front. They were practically carrying him.

“Wait... This position is a l-little...ahhhhhh!”

“What are you doing getting all riled about, you idiot! Keep a tight hold of him!”

“Yoooooooouuuuuuu traaaaaaiiiitooooooooors! Takasu, you schemed against me, didn’t you?! Yasuko-san, weren’t you on my side?!”

“Hmm, sorry. ★ I definitely want you to be a good friend to Ryuu-chan going forward, and since I phoned your father just earlier and he seemed pretty angry, I thought it’d be better to send you back home as normal first.”

“Kuh, you were conspiring with my parents...I guess no matter how young you seem, a parent is still a parent!”

“Ryuu-chan, make sure you’re keeping a good hold of him. Ami-chan, help me over here.”

Yasuko had Ami hold the package and squeezed the dye cream onto the brush. Yasuko firmly held onto Kitamura’s face. Ami also grabbed him by one ear and helped keep his head in place.

“Ahh. Your blond hair was so short lived, wasn’t it Yuusaku? Just accept it.”

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

Not knowing when to give up, Kitamura struggled and shook his head as much as he could. At that time, Yasuko and Ami lost their grip on him.

“Noooooooooooooooo!”

“Kyaaaaaaaaah!”

They screamed. Kitamura had hit the tools they were using out of their hands. The dye spewed out everywhere and, of course, it rained down on Yasuko and Ami’s heads.

“Noooo! This is bad, this is really bad! Hurry and get to the bath, the bath! The shower! If we don’t wash it off, it’ll dye us, too!”

“Ueeeeeeeeeh! I-It stiiiiiiings~! M-my eyes hurt!”

“The cold cream?! Where is it?! Uwaaaah, it hurts it hurts! It got in my eyes, too! And it stinks! If we don’t get it off, we’re really in troooooouuble!”

It was a scene straight from hell. Ryuuji also wanted to scream. The tatami, the floor, the ceiling, the walls...no, it was really the people who were most important. Giving up on holding on to Kitamura, he tried to rub away what he could of the dye on the two girls’ crying faces so they could open their eyes. Ryuuji pushed them towards the cold cream and bath. He could hear the sounds of their clothes coming off in the bath and then the shower running.

“See, you should have just left me alone!”

Without even letting the place settle down, Kitamura came at them.

“Whaaat?!”

At Kitamura’s remark, Ryuuji forgot to even wash his hands. He turned around with his ogre mask fully in place. It looked like he was thinking, *What did you just say, you damn insolent straw-head?*

That, in fact, was what he was thinking.

My tatami... No, that’s not important right now. This guy’s attitude. Yasuko only went this far because you came into our house. Now you’ve done it, you jerk. How are you still talking like that when you’ve been acting this reckless?

“Don’t screw around, you! You come into our house and you want us to leave you alone?! That’s rich, after making us worry! And now you’ve got that attitude?! Don’t screw around, you damn kid! You can go right on home where your angry parents are ready to flip you upside down and whip you!”

“D-don’t you tell me to go home! You traitor! I believed in you!”

“Shut up! I don’t care what you think, especially when you’ve got no idea how worried you’ve got everyone around you, you stupid jerk!”

“Oh, I see!”

“That’s right!”

The sound of Kitamura stomping went down the stairs, but then he came back to grab the home-run rat-mouse he had forgotten. This time he left the door wide open as he left.

“You idiot! Idiot! Idiot! I don’t care about that guy anymore!”

Ryuuji felt like throwing salt behind Kitamura as he went over to the door and banged it closed.

“...Hhh!”

At his feet, Taiga staggered, fell, and had one hand outstretched to the person who had left. She was soundlessly vocalizing. She looked like the Omiya statue at Atami beach being kicked away by a geta sandal. She was pleading to Kanichi, the mirage of a man invisible to their eyes, still in her pitiful pose. Her fingertips shook.

“That’s why I said it from the start. Anyone who humors someone like that ends up looking like an idiot. Oh, this is good. ♥ I almost went with pizza, but we definitely made the right choice!”

“You can get dessert, too. ★ I’m really sorry, Ami-chan...for making you help... Are your eyes feeling better? And I’m really sorry for getting your uniform

dirty...”

“It’s completely fine now, I’m telling you~! I washed it right away, so my face, skin, and hair were all fine. Plus, our uniform is black, so if I can get the smell out, it’s all fine.”

“Make sure to get the cleaning bill to me, okay?”

“Noooo~! You’re already treating me more than enough right now! Actually, I might have gotten lucky today. I got treated to so much!”

Ami smiled. She had dried her hair by tackling it quickly with a dryer and wore the parka and sweats Taiga had slept in the day before. They had taken what emergency measures they could for her clothes and put them in an ecobag for her to take home. Next to Ami, Taiga was prodding and twirling the same tomato pasta Ami was eating with a fork.

As they waited for Ami and Yasuko’s hair to dry, the four of them ate dinner inside an Italian chain in the station building. Yasuko had said she wanted to treat Ami to dinner after causing her trouble, and this was where they had ended up.

“Kawashima, you sure you’re fine with this place?”

“Yeah, why? Isn’t this good? I like it.”

“That’s not what I mean, weren’t you eating pasta for lunch, too...”

“Huh, Italians eat pasta three times a day, don’t they?! Huh? No way, Takasukun, did you think I’m that oblivious~? No way, no way, don’t think of me like that! Everyone says that about me! Hey, Aisaka-san, you don’t go misunderstanding me either.”

They hadn’t seen Ami-chan with her ironclad good-girl mask on in a while. She turned a smile to Taiga, who was sitting next to her. Taiga, still silent, seemed bored as she continued to pick at her pasta. Yasuko peeked at Taiga’s face.

“Taiga-chaan... I’m sorry that I made it turn out this way after we just had a nice sleepover... I came on too strong and made Kitamura-kun mad...”

Taiga raised her face in a fluster.

“N-no, I’m not mad at you or anything, Ya-chan! I was even holding Kitamura-

kun, so I made him mad, too...”

She shook her head from side to side, but Taiga’s voice still definitely lacked spirit. She might have been down because she was worried Kitamura was also mad at her. She looked like she didn’t have the will to even get the pasta on her fork, and she was even sitting calmly next to Ami.

If anyone asked Ryuuji, though, Kitamura’s anger was selfish and stubborn. Taiga didn’t have a reason to be down in the first place. Now that it had come to it, that was all he could think. He just couldn’t understand the reasoning of someone who would act in a way that make others worry and then get angry about it and say “Leave me alone.” He didn’t see any point to it.

“Does it matter what happens with Kitamura? It was just like what Kawashima said.”

Oh dear. Yasuko apologetically looked at her son, who was taking a bite of peperoncino.

“Ryuu-chan, you can’t get mad at Kitamura-kun. I know you’re worried, but you can’t say that. Okay? Look, we have a cute guest like Ami-chan tonight. Aren’t you happy about that~? Hey hey, look, smile now~?”

“Oh stop, Yasuko-san! Takasu-kun isn’t the type to cheer up because someone like me is around!”

“Whaat~? Really? That’s so strange, but you’re so cute Ami-chan.”

“It’s because Takasu-kun is already dead set on a girl!”

Blech! The spicy togarashi got stuck in Ryuuji’s throat just at the right time. *What are you talking about?!* he wanted to say, but his gagging only produced coughs.

Yasuko once again tilted her head, “Whaat~? This one?”

Blergh! This time the one to cough was Taiga, probably surprised by Yasuko suddenly pointing at her. She kept her face down as she coughed. Sitting across from Ryuuji, she was like his mirror. She had a heartfelt grimace on her face.

Ryuuji wasn’t sure what Ami was thinking, but she was smiling like an angel. “No? Not her, another girl.”

“Whaaaaaat~! It’s not Taiga-chan?! Whaaaaaaaat! But I was looking forward to the day when Taiga would officially become part of the family as his wife~!”

“Wh-what are you doing deciding that all by yourself...*cough*! Kawashima! What do you think you’re saying!”

“Oh dear, Takasu-kun, are you the type who doesn’t want your parents knowing about this stuff? If you hide it and something happens between you two, then she would immediately know that it wasn’t Aisaka-san. But it’s fine! Yasuko-san, if you want her as your daughter, you could just adopt her. It seems like she doesn’t have a good relationship with her parents anyway!”

“Oh, I could do that~! But I don’t know what Taiga-chan’s mom is like yet...”

“Seriously, you two! You’re making way too big a deal about this! Cut it out! How’re you being so selfish?!” Of course, Ryuuji interrupted the conversation by raising his voice. They didn’t really know what they were talking about, and he was afraid their conversation was skimming too close to reopening the wounds that were still on Taiga’s heart.

“Ryuuji, you’re making the biggest deal out of this.” Taiga’s expression didn’t change at all. She smoothly pushed back her hair.

“I don’t want you, or anyone, to interfere in my life. I like where I am now. I’m fine like this. I have money, and I can wash stuff, and I know how to make eggs now, so there isn’t a single issue with me being alone. I don’t have a single concern about the future!”

You can...make eggs...? Ryuuji automatically had the impulse to question her.

“Uwah! What a lonely girl! What a hermit!”

“Say whatever you want. It doesn’t matter what you think, Dimhuahua.”

Unshaken by Ami poking fun at her, Taiga simply continued to wolf down her pasta. At that, Ryuuji suddenly wanted to ask Taiga about something else. When she said she wanted to live alone, she was just saying that because it was convenient, wasn’t she? Of course, she wanted to actually be with Kitamura, didn’t she? But there wasn’t much hesitation in Taiga’s expression as she said she wanted to live alone. She didn’t seem reluctant about it at all, so maybe she really did think that. For the first time, Ryuuji felt doubt.

Maybe the Taiga he was seeing and the real Taiga were completely different. Maybe he didn't really know what was in her heart. Maybe they didn't really understand each other either. Maybe they weren't that close to each other. The truth was that reality might not match up with how he imagined Taiga to be.

He could hear Ami muttering to herself as though she were exasperated.

"You really think that you're fine by yourself? I would think someone like you would be the one least likely to forgive Yuusaku, and the most likely to be angry at him..."

In the end, they took Ami home after spending the whole day with her. The Takasus and Taiga started heading home as a group of three. Yasuko lead the way on the night road, and somehow, they ended up walking in a line.

"Hey, Ryuuji."

Taiga kept pace with him.

"Dimhuahua just said something to put the scent on Minorin, didn't she? And then I started thinking... Minori loves horror, so she always says she hates horror, right?"

"Yeah, she's using reverse psychology."

"Didn't Kitamura-kun say he didn't want to become student council president? Do you think that he really thinks the opposite and that he really wants to be president?"

You're talking about Kitamura again, Ryuuji was about to say, but he kept his mouth shut.

Sure, Kitamura had said that. And it seemed like something really had happened with the student council president before that. He also wouldn't respond when they asked him about it. And even though he thought Kitamura was being a jerk, Ryuuji also still wondered how he was doing.

"That might be true."

"And the situation is at a deadlock. I can't think of anything else, so if it comes to it, then..."

“We need him to become president, don’t we?”

In that moment, Ryuuji had a devilish idea.

The next day was Sunday. They had more than enough time to prepare.

Chapter 5

“**W**hoa...?!”

“Wh-why’s this happening right in the morning?!”

“That gave me a heart attack!”

It was Monday.

It had just turned eight, and they were right in the middle of the time when the students were coming into school. The students would normally be lazily greeting each other. *Morning! Yo!* The school should have been busy with the din of their echoing voices.

But that morning, the situation in the entranceway was a little different from usual. The happy-go-lucky greetings were interrupted, and what echoed instead were shrieks of surprise and fear. The unknowing students who came to school would notice the crowd stopped in their tracks and try to look around to see what was going on, swallow their breath, and join the outer edges of the wordless crowd. In turn, the hallway and area around the

shoe cubbies, which already weren’t that spacious, became a traffic jam of students who, once stopped, couldn’t run away even if they wanted to.

There was a five-meter air pocket that the students were trying not to get pushed into. They were acting like a crowd on board the last train trying to avoid a zone of leftover vomit. In this case, though, the crowd wasn’t in a train car and what they were trying to avoid wasn’t puke.

“Do you think you can really do it? Are you okay?”

“I-I’m fine.”

“Don’t push yourself. I was the one who was supposed to do it in the first place.”

“No...I’ll do it. I’m the one who said I wanted to do it. I do what I say I’ll do. I swore that I would do whatever I could for Kitamura-kun.”

Ryuuji and Taiga stood in the middle of the surrounding group. In low whispers only they could hear, they spoke to each other.

They were standing on a stepladder that they had pulled out of the gym's storage. Taiga's eyes were wide open as she held a microphone in her hands. After he had made sure Taiga was certain about everything, Ryuuji put a handmade sash over her shoulder. In that moment, before they could even give an explanation, shrieks came from the crowd that surrounded them, one after another.

"You've got to be kidding meeee?!"

"Just stooooooooop!"

"Someone hurry and stop them!"

"This is impossible! Impossible!"

"Excuse me?!" The voices of class 2-C echoed loudly above everyone else's from inside the boisterous crowd.

Okay, Ryuuji signaled to Taiga with his eyes. Taiga nodded gravely and took a breath.

"Quiiiiiiiiieeeeet!"

She turned to the mic and yelled, but it was just her regular voice.

"Huh? I forgot to turn it on..."

Everyone, Ryuuji included, was disappointed. The excitement in the place dimmed. For a moment, Taiga turned red, but she immediately stood her ground.

"Th-this isn't a mic! It's a weapon to do this to people who don't please me!"

Daah! She suddenly hurled it at the head of a boy standing right in front of her eyes. The one who had been hit simply fell over unconscious.

"Whoa, Haruta! Keep it together, don't die! What have you done, Palmtop Tiger?!"

Noto was now supporting Haruta's body and yelling. Incidentally, she hadn't actually thrown it that hard and had brought back her wrist to weaken the

blow. Haruta had faked falling over unconscious right on time. The whites of his eyes still showed as he relaxed his whole body, and his faint looked strangely real. Ryuuji was thankful they were able to cooperate with such an amazing adlib performance. *Good job.* He gave them a small thumbs up. Noto and Haruta also sneakily returned the thumbs up.

“W-wait, someone call a teacher?!”

“She’s gone violent!”

The commotion grew as more students started clustering together, wondering what was going on. There were even some who had started taking pictures.

Content, Ryuuji licked his thin lips at the excellent response and at how well the plants in class 2-C were doing. *Right, this is good, be even more scared, you pitiful sacrifices...* He wanted all of the students in the school to be terrified. If they weren’t disgusted by this idea, he would be in trouble.

“Quiiiiieet! This morning, I have a terrifying announcement for you duuuuunces!”

Taiga’s rancorous voice rang out again, this time at full force from the now powered-on mic. The students’ dumbfounded mouths were ajar as they stood stock-still.

“I hate all of you...!”

Taiga looked at each and every one of their faces as though examining them. Her long hair hung down pompously, and her eyes glistened brightly. On the sash across her shoulder were the words “Student Council Presidential Candidate.” It was super simple, so it was easy to understand.

“You sleazebags embarrassed me with those rumors. Well, you’ve all had your despicable fun... I’ve been thinking this whoooooole time of how to get revenge on you all for spreading rumors like wildfire about who I was dating...and then I thought of it!”

Taiga bared her teeth. She lifted her left hand and gripped the air like she was trying to take all the students into her clutches and crush them.

“I, Aisaka Taiga, will become student council president and paint your high school lives into a dark nightmare. I’ll give you memories of fresh blood, I’ll inter you and leave you in the m-m-mooooorguuuuuuue!”

Eeeeeeeek! A high-pitched, true shriek rose from the mass of students—not one of the plants, either. Adding insult to injury, Ryuuji stepped forward with his forehead furrowed.

“And I’m the head of her campaign... You all said whatever you wanted... You called me pitiful, a pushover, a loser... I won’t forgive you...ever!”

He didn’t have a mic and was of course a little nervous, so he couldn’t be as loud. His voice was shaking and low, but combined with his glistening psycho eyes, which were the real deal, it was more than persuasive enough.



“Wh-wh-who is it that said Takasu wasn’t really scary...?!”

“He really is terrifying!”

“H-he’s gonna kill us...”

“Those eyes aren’t normal!”

Taiga laughed faintly and Ryuuji’s glistening eyes took on an even more murderous glint. The students who looked up at the two of them were screaming, clearly in the grip of real fear. *That* Palmtop Tiger and the delinquent Takasu were striking terror into the students’ hearts, cursing the student body by running in the election.

You don’t actually need to be that scared, Ryuuji thought internally but didn’t soften his glinting eyes. “My high school life!” a girl seemed close to crying out loud. He looked at her and turned up the murderous beams of his gaze. He felt self-conscious and guilty about doing it on purpose.

Yes, Ryuuji and Taiga had resorted to *Samurai Reincarnation* measures—they would go down the wrong path on their own, just like in the movie, and then...

“Oh! It’s that blond vice president Kitamura-kun!”

“Apparently, he said he wasn’t running in the election and was quitting the student council!”

“Is that why the Palmtop Tiger is trying to take over the school?!”

This was their aim.

There was only one of the students of class 2-C that they hadn’t coordinated with about being a plant. That was Kitamura. Oddly, he made a grand entrance into the school with his still blond head. His face went stiff for a moment when he saw Ryuuji and Taiga, but it seemed he immediately guessed at the situation. He quickly ignored them and walked away. He was too clever for his own good. Several students followed him.

“Wait, Kitamura! Didn’t you see that?!”

“Please run in the election! Be one of the candidates!”

“If you let it keep going like this, they’ll ruin our high school lives!”

Yes, yes, just like that. Ryuuji and Taiga casually looked at each other and confirmed that their plan was going well. They were using themselves as bait to trap Kitamura. The more everyone hated what they were doing, the more pressure there would be on Kitamura to enter the election. The mood would spread around the school, and Kitamura would need to become a candidate in order to crush them. He would be put into a situation where he had to become a candidate. It was reverse psychology.

Incidentally, because Minori was a well-known friend of Taiga's, she had already sneaked off to the classroom without being involved in the commotion. She was the one-and-only least qualified plant for the role of pretending to be afraid of Taiga.

Then there was one more point that needed to be made.

"Kyaah! How scary, what's going on?!"

Yes, good timing, Ryuuji nodded slightly. It was Ami yelling in her key role. Maya and Nanako, as subordinates, made a grand entrance. Ami hadn't wanted to be a decoy, but Maya had persuaded her.

"Oh, Kawashima-san! This is dangerous, hide behind me!"

"No, behind me!"

"No, no, I'll be the one to take you all the way to the classroom, Ami-chan!"

Ami was immediately surrounded by the boys and hands extended to her from all sides. The meddlesome guys weren't even plants. They started bombarding the three with explanations of what had happened.

"What?!"

"That's terrible!" Maya and Nanako very naturally raised their voices.

"The Palmtop Tiger is a candidate for student council president?! Isn't that going to be a super big problem?!"

"That's right, Ami-chan, why don't you try running for the election?! Ami-chan, you're popular, after all!"

At the two's mini-play, new whispers started spreading among those surrounding them.

“Now that you mention it...”

“We don’t need Kitamura if Ami-chan runs...”

“Everyone would be okay with Kawashima-san!”

Ami turned to Maya and Nanako.

“Me, run for president?! Right...at this rate, the Palmtop Tiger will ruin everyone’s high school lives! I’m not the type for it, but I’d do it for everyone else’s sakes! OOF!”

Kablam. This time, Taiga didn’t hold back on the mic attack—like Gogo Yubari’s steel ball, she held the mic cord and whirled it around. With astounding control, she aimed it right at the crown of Ami’s head. Ami went down on one knee.

“Wah, Ami-chan!”

“Ami-chan, keep it together!”

The plants and the non-plants alike joined in the increasing commotion.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha haaa! Anyone who tries to interfere with my plan, Dimhuahua included, will fall victim to a merciless sneak attack from me!”

Whether she was going to launch a sneak attack or get them fair and square, Taiga’s intentions were made crystal clear by the swinging mic.

“We can’t let Ami-chan be in this kind of danger!”

“Damn it, it’s so dangerous, no one wants to run?!”

“That rumor started in the first place because Kitamura was being misleading! We really can’t have anyone but Kitamura run!”

“That’s right, this is Kitamura-kun’s responsibility!”

They had naturally sided with the plants and determined Kitamura was the only one who could run. It went exactly as planned, to the point it was a little scary. The students solidified in the direction of supporting Kitamura. Ryuuji’s own brain, which had come up with the amazing plan, was frightened.

Sin-glack, a strange sound came from behind Ryuuji, who wasn’t aware he was shaking slightly.

“I...”

That sound echoed heavily. Going with the mood, Taiga had swung the mic around, and at some point, the one standing behind them was...

“Aisaka-san. Takasu-kun. How about we cool our heads a little...”

...the single bachelorette (30), who had astoundingly been hit in the forehead.

“...Hm, hm. I see. At first Takasu-kun was going to be the candidate.”

“Yes...”

Ryuuji and Taiga had been pushed into the interview room. They were forced to admit their whole plan to the guidance counselor and bachelorette.

“Anyway, you chose a candidate no one would like and thought that if everyone thought ‘Kitamura has to be the candidate!’ then Kitamura would have to enter the election, but—”

“With Ryuuji, we didn’t feel like we could make it seem like there was impending danger...so I said that I could try to do it...”

The bachelorette seemed exhausted as she rubbed at her eyes and muttered. “Basically, you two thought that if Kitamura would only become president, he would be rehabilitated? You knew he couldn’t stay like this.”

Ryuuji nodded deeply.

“That’s right... And we weren’t the only ones who thought that. We called everyone else in class 2-C other than Kitamura, told them about the plan, and asked them to help out. Everyone agreed. The reason why Kitamura suddenly changed, anyway, has to be because of the student council. We thought we would figure out what happened during the process of getting him back in the council. We thought we could settle everything if we only knew what caused it.”

“But what would you do if Kitamura-kun never entered? If there’s only one candidate, then the election is just a formality. Aisaka-san would really become president.”

“Kitamura-kun definitely isn’t the type to just leave things alone.”

Ryuuji nodded his head in agreement with Taiga's words. The two of them had been able to go through with their grand *Samurai Reincarnation* plan in the first place because everyone in class 2-C had believed that.

"Did you ever think that he'd just become more stubborn with everyone around him telling him to do it?"

"We still believed Kitamura would run in the end."

At Taiga's conviction-filled words, the bachelorette and guidance counselor each looked at each other.

"I understand. If you really believe in it to that extent, then fight to the end. But, Aisaka-san, if you really are elected as the student president, then you can't just say that it wasn't real."

"I understand that. When the time comes, I'll really make this school a nightmare."

"Of course, if that happens, I'll follow through as best as I can and try not to cause everyone too much trouble," Ryuuji followed up.

Haah. The bachelorette sank into a sigh. He looked into her face.

"Teacher, it's okay. We'll make it back safely from the underworld."

Taiga, probably trying to be conscientious in her own way, tried to cheer up the bachelorette, whose forehead still sported traces of the blow from the mic.

"Yeah, please do come back safe. That's right, you need to at least make posters and flyers with your platform... Come to the teacher's office later, and I'll show you how to use the copier. Make sure to think of terrifying and bloody campaign promises. You know how to use a computer, right? I'll help you."

In this way, the bachelorette (age 30), too, became part of the gang trying to catch Kitamura since he had dropped into the underworld.

On that day, they made two styles of posters to put up around the school: one rain-gutter-colored one and another that was filled with gloom. They printed hundreds of them to put up around the school. Then they distributed flyers with the campaign slogan "Dark Contract" written out in bloody writing. All the students were successfully thrown into a whirlpool of panic.

“They’re serious!”

Of course, they distributed the posters to class 2-C, too. All of them pretended they didn’t know.

“This is becoming ridiculous!”

“Please reconsider, Takasu!”

The class made a commotion, and only Kitamura remained silent.

The election period ended in five days on Friday. Friday was when they closed off candidacy; the next Saturday was one of their two monthly weekend school days. The student council presidential election would be held during the long homeroom.

“Well...he’s a reaaally stubborn guy...”

“He hasn’t said a word since then...”

“And he’s still ignoring me... Actually, Kitamura’s been ignoring everyone in the class...”

In a stupor, Ryuuji and Taiga sat side by side holding their knees. The TV didn’t reach them. They exchanged empty words and just looked up at the ceiling.

They had finished their easy sashimi dinner, and Yasuko was already long gone to work. Left behind, the two of them were lost in thought—time had come up on them quick.

Five days already passed since they communicated with the class and explained the plan in that room. On Monday, they made their vivid *Samurai Reincarnation* declaration on the school steps. On Tuesday, they waited in front of the school gate for the students coming in and shook each person’s hand. On Wednesday, during lunch, they made a commotion by reading the student self-government plan on the school broadcast, causing several first-year girls to go

into shock. On Thursday, they used their time off to go around to each of the classes and incited screams around the school until they were scolded by the teachers, "This is going too far!"

In that four-day period, they had learned that just the name of the Palmtop Tiger was more than enough to scare the students without laying down any additional measures. Then, before they realized it...

"We have one day left... If Kitamura hasn't entered by tomorrow..."

"Then I'll be student council president."

The two of them went quiet at the same time.

Kitamura had continued to come to school with blond hair for those days. Even if he got in trouble and was told to fix his hair color, he'd obstinately return.

Starting with Ryuuji, he ignored everyone in 2-C and avoided having them in his line of sight. He didn't lend an ear to the entreaties of "Please become a candidate!" from the upperclassmen and underclassmen who came in every day. He would simply shut them out with a "You can see my head. My life is a mess, so I can't be the student council president."

It wasn't as easy as they thought. Now that they had come to this point, Kitamura let them know that he wasn't just the honor roll student they had seen him as. He was stubborn and difficult, incredibly tenacious, and could be cold when it suited him. Ryuuji darkly put his chin on his knees. He had been thinking the same thing since he had seen Kitamura crying on that day.

If that was Kitamura, what had he been seeing until now?

He had been conceited for thinking that he understood Kitamura.

He had been immature and conceited for thinking he could understand Kitamura and save him. Now Ryuuji was paying for it. He hadn't grown at all. He felt like he was just repeating the same stupid actions over and over, and just messing up.

He glanced at Taiga's profile. He had even thought he had understood Taiga. He didn't have a good reason for getting himself so involved in her life, speaking

up for her and looking after her, but had just decided it was a good thing to do—he'd thought it was a convenient, comfortable relationship.

But all he was doing was trying to control her like her father had. He had failed her. He had seen her in pain and been its cause. Even though he vowed not to do something as stupid as that again and should have learned after paying a high price to learn it, he failed Kitamura, too.

When had he messed up? He hadn't even noticed the changes in Kitamura, and once something had definitively changed, he'd decided they needed to do something. Sticking his nose in might have been his mistake.

But, in that case, would it have been okay for him to leave Kitamura alone because he was just an immature kid who couldn't understand his friend? Was that a real excuse? Ami said that if someone like Kitamura cried, someone would come save him. Kitamura knew that himself, so maybe Ryuuji should have stayed out of it because he was useless. Like Minori said, maybe he should have been waiting for a "saving grace" like Ami to appear and deal with Kitamura. Maybe they would have done a better job.

But he really couldn't have just sat there and watched. But...even that was just conceited and for his own satisfaction.

"I don't know... I don't know anything anymore..."

Ryuuji wailed and closed his eyes.

"Ryuuji. Your phone is ringing."

Taiga slipped the vibrating cell phone over the tatami to his feet. Though he felt hesitant seeing a phone number he didn't know, he pressed the red answer button. If it would allow him to escape this impasse, he would be fine with talking to a stranger.

"Yes?"

"Hello, uhh, it's Murase from class 2-A. Is this...Takasu-kun's cell phone?"

"Yes, it is... Murase-kun?"

It was a name he hadn't heard before. It wasn't a classmate from when he was a first year, either. Taiga tilted her head in curiosity and looked up at

Ryuuji's face.

"Sorry, we've never met before, but I went through school contacts to get your phone number. There was something I wanted to talk to you about. It's about Kitamura...uh. I'm part of the general affairs student council. I've been working with Kitamura since our first year."

"You're from the student council?"

He turned up the volume. He felt like his heart quickened at Murase's words.

"Right. Takasu-kun, you're supporting the Palmtop Tiger in the election, right? We understand—everyone in the student council understands. It's just part of a plan to get Kitamura in action, right?"

"Right... So you figured us out..."

"Right. Actually, I think only a portion of the people in the class are actually afraid. The second years in particular know that you're not a real delinquent for the most part and that you're Kitamura's best friend. Anyway, you don't have to worry about the presidential election was what I wanted to tell you. Tomorrow, if Kitamura doesn't, I'll enter. I can remove Taiga's nomination, too, so don't worry."

"I-I see... Thanks for telling me. Actually, I was just worrying about what we would do if Taiga actually became president."

"It's okay, leave it to me. Well, we're going to wait until the very last minute to see if Kitamura runs. Our official stance is that we believe it's best to have the vice president take over. After being with him in the student council for two years, I can't believe that he would actually quit at this point. It's not a great feeling."

"It wouldn't be... I get it."

"The president has been telling us to 'Leave that idiot alone,' but I don't think she'd ever want it to end this way now that she's on her way out."

He knew that, too. He tried to reply in agreement, but...

"Now that she's on her way out?"

"Oh, right. You wouldn't know. It's not a secret or anything, but...yeah, well, a

lot of stuff happened.”

“Can I ask what those things were? Could you tell me?”

“Well...ah, uhh...”

It was obvious Murase had made a mistake and was speaking ambiguously on purpose. Though it wasn't supposed to be a secret, he seemed shaken by whatever it was he had let slip. It confirmed what Ryuuji had thought—the reasons for Kitamura's changed behavior really had started with the student council. If he didn't get an answer here from Murase, the *Samurai Reincarnation* plan would have been purposeless.

“Please, tell me. I'm worried about Kitamura. I don't know what happened and...I can only depend on the student council! If you know anything at all, even if it's just a guess or might be your imagination, please tell me! This is how desperate I am! Please!”

Even though Murase wouldn't be able to see it, Ryuuji desperately bowed his head. *Well, uhh...* For a while, Murase's voice tapered off, but finally he bent to Ryuuji's persuasion.

“Well...the first time Kitamura said he might quit the student council was a little while ago. We had the culture festival, right? The next day, the student council and acting committee got together for cleanup. That day...”

Ryuuji, still sitting on the tatami, listened to the story Murase told. He even forgot to say anything at the end and remained silent with the phone pressed to his ear.

Then, when he finished listening, he only had one thing to say at the end:

“Thanks for telling me.”

He hung up and flipped the phone closed.

He stood up.

“Ryuuji? Hey, what was that call about? Who was it? You were talking about Kitamura-kun, right?”

He couldn't reply to Taiga. He was still lightly dressed in only a long sleeved T-shirt and sweat pants. He didn't have anything else on, but he took long strides

heading towards the front door. *Ryuuji?! What's wrong?!* Taiga went after him, but he didn't turn around. He couldn't.

The inside of his head was blank.

He was confused and something else? Was he angry? He still didn't know what it was, but the emotion came from the bottom of his stomach and was rising like fire. It was as though it were even burning away Ryuuji's reasoning.

"I said hey! Where are you going?!"

"I'm going...to punch the daylights out of Kitamura!"

"What?! Wait...Ryuuji!"

Still without any jacket on, he stuffed his feet into his sneakers and leapt out the front door, cutting off Taiga's yells. He didn't even lock the door but just ran down the outer stairs in one go.

It was night, and the sky was black. The air was cold enough to pierce his skin and freeze his throat with one breath, but he struggled to keep running. The feeling of the hard asphalt slapped his soles and shook him up, making his back hurt. His feet didn't stop as he sped up when he got to the national highway. He went across the large bridge towards his goal, towards Kitamura's house. Even if Kitamura ignored him or hated him, Ryuuji would drag him out and ask him.

He was immature, sure, he was an idiot who made mistakes, but that didn't matter anymore, none of it mattered. He really had been sincerely worried. He really had been thinking of Kitamura. He wasn't the only one. There was Minori, Yasuko, Noto, Haruta, everyone in the class, Murase and the rest of the student council, Kitamura's family, the bachelorette, and also Taiga. Taiga had cried. For Kitamura.

It had all happened because of *that*.

Because of something so worthless.

Kitamura was just throwing a tantrum like a little kid.

"That-that-that...I-DI-OT!"

He squeezed it out from between his gritted back teeth. From the national highway, he started to see the embankment. He ran up the concrete steps and

pushed his way through the dried weeds. He jumped onto the promenade of the river bank, which smelled like a gutter even in the winter.

He wanted to get there even a little faster, so he could grab the jerk's collar and pull him out. He wanted to get a good look at the face that was causing such a huge commotion over something so small.

He headed towards the bridge's light as he imagined the face of the hateful blond in his head. Then, suddenly, a shadow appeared from the dried grass.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek?!"

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

They screamed, mirroring each other. When Ryuuji fell over, the other person did, too.

Ow, he groaned and opened his squinting eyes. When he saw the other person, he froze.

As they lay under the streetlamp sprawled on their butts in the exact same pose, the two of them looked at each other. They pointed at each other and lost the ability to speak. Ryuuji might have been the one who was more surprised. His lips quivered and gaped. In a stupor, he looked at the face of the person he had bumped into, which was slightly different from the one he had imagined in his head.

"K-Kitamura?! What's with your face?!"

"Takasu..."

Before he knew it, Ryuuji was holding Kitamura's shoulder and searching his pockets for a tissue for the guy he had been about to beat the daylights out of.

"Th-thanks..."

"Who did this to you?! Are you okay?!"

"Well, it was at home. I had a little thing...with my dad..."

Kitamura had appeared out of nowhere with blood flowing freely from his nose down his chin. Getting a better look, Ryuuji realized Kitamura was bleeding from the mouth, too, and that his swollen eyelid was bruised. His

cheeks were still wet from tears he couldn't hide.

"Can you stand? Look, hold onto me!"

"Ugh..."

Kitamura grabbed Ryuuji's hand, which he offered with no hesitation, and got up. As he stood, even more tears flowed from Kitamura's eyes. Ryuuji couldn't pretend he hadn't seen, so he continued to pat Kitamura's back in desperation.

Murase had told Ryuuji the reason for those tears, too. They were tears for the student council president Kanou Sumire expediting her post-graduation plans to study abroad. She would leave school in the next week and go to America, and it was probably because of that that Kitamura was sulking like a child.

Calling the river swift was probably too much of a compliment. They were at the end of the promenade that continued from gray street to gray street along the river, which could only be described as extensive.

In a corner of the bridge's deserted sidewalk, save for the occasional truck or taxi that would flow by, the two of them sat side by side with their legs hanging from gaps in the railing. Together, they looked down at the black, polluted river as it flowed.

Awkwardly sniffing, Ryuuji stole a glance at Kitamura's profile. He was completely beaten up. His full-blast Uniqlo knit collar was stretched out, and the shirt he wore inside was dirty with blood all the way down to his chest. The bridge of his glasses bent diagonally and clung to his nose. The quarrel with his family had escalated, and his father snapped. Kitamura, who couldn't compete in a battle of physical strength, said he'd run away.

"I'm really sorry...that I couldn't tell you all this time."

"Yeah."

"Really...I'm sorry for all of it."

“It’s fine.”

Kitamura, seeming embarrassed, ruffled his own hair. He took a deep breath, as though he were preparing himself for something. Even in the dark, his eyes were obviously bruised. He rubbed them and licked his split lip.

“I know that I made everyone worried. I know that Aisaka is running for me. I understand it all. And...because everyone was so worried about me, it got harder and harder to tell anyone. It was terrible, it was idiotic, it was pitiful. You must have thought that too, after hearing it from Murase, right, Takasu? And you were coming to question me about it at my house, right?”

Slowly, while watching the surface of the river, Kitamura continued. *I just couldn’t talk about it*, he said.

That I liked the president.

The student council had gone camping in the summer, and at that time he found out Kanou Sumire wanted to go abroad after she graduated. He knew about that grand and incredibly distant dream. He had already realized he couldn’t go with her, with his abilities.

“She’s going to become an astronaut.”

“Wh-wha?! Uh?! Uh-hh?!”

“It seems impossible, right? But she got a direct introduction to an American university for space engineering from a professor, and it went from being a dream to being real. She said she’s going to start studying shuttle development. She said she wants to be an engineer so she can see a world humanity has never gone to.”

You mean Kanou Sumire...the patriarch? Ryuuji couldn’t move his mouth past an “Uh.”

He knew the patriarch was amazing, but he couldn’t imagine that she was actually trying to reach for something as big as that, for things as big as space and all of humanity. Studying abroad in America was a big enough deal to dazzle Ryuuji’s eyes. That was a world that was already distant enough not to seem real. No, it wasn’t that... It wasn’t just that.

It was that Kitamura liked the president. That was it. That was the first he had heard of that. *Kitamura Yuusaku, tell me more about that.* But Kitamura was already continuing on, like he was talking to himself.

“Because of that, I was already on a direct route to a broken heart. I was completely resolute about giving up. I was going to figure out my feelings by graduation and tell her ‘Do your best!’ I was going to be the loudest voice in the crowd. And I was going to wave my hand and smile as I sent her off—that was what I decided. When the time came, I would cheer on the president from the bottom of my heart, with no regrets. That was...”

His voice suddenly cracked. He gulped and took a deep breath. This time, Ryuuji waited and pretended like he hadn’t noticed until Kitamura regained control over his breathing.

“But then suddenly...”

“Right...”

“While we were cleaning after the culture festival, suddenly, she said she was going. She said she would be going next month. She wouldn’t wait for graduation; she’d go when it was convenient for them over there. She would withdraw from school and get her high school qualifications remotely. I was a mess; I thought I had at least four more months. It was unfair. I didn’t know what to do. I hadn’t figured myself out yet. I panicked. I couldn’t smile. I couldn’t say anything. And...the president hadn’t said anything to me. Well, I don’t know what I wanted her to say to me.”

Kitamura gripped the railing of the stone bridge. Ryuuji couldn’t find any words to say.

“Around then...I was just thinking I didn’t even leave an impression on her at all. I liked her for the past two years, and I didn’t make any impression on her heart—not a single one. I’m not even a speck of dust to her. The president only saw her dream; I just existed in a corner of her vision. I realized I was just useless. I was an idiot, and I hadn’t grown at all. I realized my life until now hasn’t had any worth. It’s been meaningless and useless. So...well, that’s how it is.”

He had wanted to throw it all away, quit, and break everything, so he

rebelled. He pushed up his blond hair and put on a pitiful smile.

He had thrown away everything he cared for—even thrown away everything about himself. He had just wanted to yell, *everything is trash! I know that now!* This honors student had done all of that.

“I thought that if I did that, maybe the president would have said, ‘That’s not true.’ If that happened, ahhh...it looks like I really am an idiot.”

“You’re not. You just got hurt.”

Ryuuji gripped the railing, mirroring Kitamura’s pose. He was surprised at the cold and how painful the rough surface felt against his bare hands. *Like I’ll lose*, he thought, gripping it harder. He had thought the reason for Kitamura’s agony had been stupid, and now, he was regretting it.

Because he was so serious and because that unrequited love was sincere, Kitamura had suffered. Now that he was by Kitamura’s side listening to the story, he understood the full extent of his hurt. This, too, might have been a conceited misunderstanding, but it was still what Ryuuji thought.

“But...it’s not like you had to give up in the first place. You don’t have to have the same goals and well, if it worked out...wouldn’t it be good enough to go home to the same house? Would confessing really have been that futile if that was what you were aiming for? It’s true that she’s amazing enough to make anyone do a double take and that she had a ridiculous goal in mind but...it’s not any different from having a career goal. A salary man isn’t below an astronaut. If you’re serious about it, it doesn’t matter what you are—an entertainment worker, someone in sales, a mangaka, an author, a fisherman, an architect, a convenience store worker, a school teacher. Anyone working those jobs can still be amazing. Thinking that you can’t follow her is a strange realization to come to.”

“I...couldn’t think about it that way.”

Kitamura’s voice sank and faltered.

“Her dream was just so amazing, I didn’t think I could compete once it came true. I thought she would think I was embarrassing, since I couldn’t reach for a goal as high as her. I want to follow her even if she goes far away, but I feel like I

can't do it. I don't want to become baggage. I don't want to bother her or drag her down. I don't want her to hate me. But there isn't a way for me to reach the president's level, anyway. There isn't a foreigner who would give me an introduction, and I couldn't withdraw from school to fly to another country. In the end, I can't just keep being the underclassman who's yearning for the president...can I?"

"Don't you cry."

"I'm not."

Ryuuji's chest also quietly hurt.

It wasn't as though he didn't understand Kitamura's feelings about giving up on his unrequited love. 'No job is better than another.' That was easy to say, but his words were definitely just for show. An astronaut was someone special. They were someone who had been chosen to handle that responsibility. They had the heavy burden of humanity's dreams on their shoulders as part of their job. No matter how financially successful you were or how great you were at any other job, it wasn't the same. He really did understand that, but he couldn't say it. He couldn't say that because his morals would eat away at him, but he actually did understand.

Even if you could wave from the ground, cheer them on, and support them, you would never be equal. It wasn't just the distance that set them apart.

He knew that.

"Well, because of that, I tried dyeing my hair. I tried running away. My parents were mad from the start, but they were just looking out for me until then. And then we got to today, and they started asking me stuff like, 'Are you actually thinking of the future' and 'Looks like you're not entering the student council election'...so I said I'd stop going to school. And, well, they bought it."

"That's also...how do I put this...that was really plucky..."

"So, I got beat up like this. This was the first time I'd been in a fight, so I was so surprised. Getting punched really does hurt. I was scared when my dad got angry, and then I ran away. It wasn't as though I could have given a reason if anyone asked me why I wanted to quit school. It's not like I could say I was

desperate because my heart was broken.”

“I have to at least ask...but you don’t actually want to quit school, right?”

“Of course not. I don’t want to do something like that at all. What I want—if it all comes together the way I want, is for the president to go back to her original schedule for going abroad and then for me to become the president and look cool while doing it. I want to be able to tell her, ‘Leave the rest to me!’ or something... Then, I want the president to think something like, ‘Kitamura has become a guy that I can trust.’ That’s really what I want.”

“Your personality is really coming through. You didn’t even mention wanting the president to like you back.”

“Right, that’s also a possibility. That’s such a reach, I hadn’t even thought of it.”

Without thinking, Ryuuji laughed. Then he mulled over Kitamura’s wishes in the back of his head, and a realization struck.

“Right. You really do want to be elected.”

“You got me.”

Kitamura laughed. In a low voice, which was similar to the sound of how he’d cried, he confessed the secret in his heart.

“Right. I do. I want to become a great president. A vice president is nominated by the president. When I was chosen as the vice president, I was really happy. I thought that the president was recognizing me a little. But the president is leaving. And if I become president, I feel like everything would really come to an end. No, in reality, we’ve already reached the end. Whether I become the president or not, the president and I still need to go our separate ways. But I got caught up in being contrary. I didn’t want the feelings from when she nominated me to be vice president to be negated. It was true she recognized me, and I want to become someone who can meet those demands. That was the type of man I wanted to become: someone the president would recognize as the new student council president. But I also didn’t, because if I did, it would all be over. Well, it’s already over. I’ve been going in this loop this whole time.”

“It didn’t go the way you hoped it would... So that’s life...”

Suddenly hit by nostalgia, Ryuuji sort of wanted to laugh a little. Instead, the laugh became a waft of white breath that slipped out of his mouth.

“What was that all of a sudden?”

“Well, I just remembered something. Taiga was saying something similar in early spring. She had a lot of things that didn’t go the way she planned and...so we went to a family restaurant and were talking about how life was hard, and in the end, Taiga snapped and kicked a telephone pole until it bent over.”

“Oh, as expected of Aisaka... That’s on a completely different level from me.”

Ryuuji looked up at the sky and searched for quiet Orion.

Taiga’s tears had stopped, and they turned up towards the still-twinkling group of stars until they started walking again.

He didn’t think the weak light of the distant stars could die. Though they were hindered by the layer of pollution in the atmosphere and the selfish light of the streets, the stars were still shining on that day, even when separated by tens of thousands of years. The same stars and the same light continued to shine as they had on that day. They hadn’t disappeared.

They would shine on the day he had been with Taiga, this day, the next day, and the day after that.

“Hey...do you think you can see Orion in America, too?” Kitamura asked, looking up at the night sky in the same way.

“I wonder...maybe you could see it in the same season? America is so wide.”

“Yeah...you wouldn’t be able to see it in the same way as from here. Right...the country is so far away.”

“But it’s a lot closer than a star is to another star. Even if a star faded, and the constellation changed, what you’re looking at is still the same constellation. Even if you’re not beside it, even if you can’t see it together, once night comes, once the season comes, you’ll definitely be able to see the same stars—you’ll be able to see the same thing.”

Right. That wouldn’t change.

If you stopped, looked up at the sky, and searched for the stars, your feelings

for someone else looking up at the same stars wouldn't disappear.

If you only knew that, no matter how distant you were—

“Huh? Takasu, did you hear that just now.”

“Hm?”

Kitamura started glancing around. Then he pointed a finger. At the same time, that voice also reached Ryuuji's ears.

Ryuuuujiiii, it said.

Youuu iiiiiooooot doooog, it said.

Weaving through the dry grass, the long-haired silhouette swayed. Wrapped in a men's scarf, wearing a frilly dress covered by a knit parka, Taiga called Ryuuji's name as she walked the wrong way.

“Oh no... Of course. I don't want to look this beat up and pitiful in front of a girl.”

Kitamura heaved himself up. He dusted off his lame cotton pants and waved his hand at Ryuuji without turning around.

“I'm heading out first. I'm going home. I'll see you tomorrow...at school.”

“Kitamura...are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm okay. I'll apologize to my dad...and decide. I'll decide it once and for all for myself.”

He muttered in a low voice and started walking away. Ryuuji stood up to see his retreating back when it happened.

“Oh! I see you! Why you, Ryuuji!”

She probably hadn't noticed Kitamura, who disappeared into the grass in the opposite direction. As soon as Taiga saw Ryuuji, she started running at him with a pretty frightful face. He was probably in for a horrific beating. He might be punched. He prepared for it. He loosened his knees so he could avoid a punch, no matter where it came from.

“You! You just jumped out without listening to me asking you to stop; what are you doing here?!”

“Whoa...”

In the blink of an eye, Taiga’s ice-cold hands went right for his neck.

It was far more efficient than beating him up. He felt himself drifting away from the extreme cold almost immediately.

“I went after you right away, but I lost sight of you and got lost. I asked a kid I ran into if someone with a demonic face came by, and they were shaking when they told me that there was someone heading to the river bank looking like they were going after their prey. Oh, so you’re a feral stray now... You even traumatized a kid who was just passing by...”

As they walked side by side on the promenade with the long grass around them, Taiga huffed. Her breath was white, and he noticed now that the night was extremely cold. It seemed the reason he was shaking was because of the weather.

“So. Did you really go to beat up Kitamura-kun?”

“No.”

“Then what were you doing here this whole time? What was that call?”

“I can’t say.”

He intended to keep it a secret forever that he had talked to Kitamura there. He thought Kitamura must have talked because it was him. Even if Taiga punched him and kicked him, even if he was pushed to the brink of death, even if he was crucified to a cross and taken to Sado, the exile island, even if he was put in a neck brace... Still looking at his shoes as he walked, Ryuuji stopped breathing right then.

“Uggguhyyy!”

He hadn’t thought that he would actually be strangled to death. The river that flowed beside him visually crossed over with the river Styx, and he actually was frightened to the point he tried to brush her away.

“Stop walking.”

“Uhh?”

He noticed the softness of what was strangling him.

Like Ryuuji had for her, Taiga had wrapped him in the scarf. She was as high as she could go behind him, but they still had a height difference. Awkwardly, and without taking her strength into consideration, she was clumsily and violently strangling him as she wrapped it around his neck twice like a lasso.

“Guuuuuuh!”

“You’re so fussy...”

Squeeze. She wrung his neck from behind... No, actually, she just tied the scarf in place. She hit the knot to signal she was done. He writhed from the pain and loosened the cashmere that was piled around his neck until he could finally breathe. Then he was wrapped in its soft warmth.

The smell that came to his nose wasn’t his own but what always came from Taiga’s hair. It was like the translucent nectar that would drip from sweet flowers. Her smell had been embedded in it from all the times he lent it to her.

A girl’s smell—it was the smell of shampoo or hair mousse or hair wax, or the smell of the bare skin from her neck, behind her ears. Anyway, it was warm cashmere that had the traces of her thirty-six-degree Celsius heat. Like Taiga would, he brought it right below his nose. He pressed his cold hands to his mouth and breathed out. It became even warmer from the heat of his own breath. In the wind of the too-cold, early winter night, he finally raised his face.

There were little bits of dry weeds coming out and dry sand scattered on the road. There was no one before them and no one behind them. Sometimes, far away, the sound of a running car would go by faintly. Other than that, there was the sound of the wind and their footsteps mixing with the sounds of the running river. In the endless expanse of black sky, the light of the stars continued to twinkle, no different from that other day.

Even if they couldn’t see them, even if they were far away, even if they were just a mirage of the past, the groups of stars above Ryuuji’s head were always there. They were there on that day and had been there the previous day. They would probably be there the next day, too. Whether they cried or laughed, the stars would continue to be there, unchanging. Even if there were days where cold rain would fall, or nights when his body wouldn’t stop shivering, or days

when he wouldn't want to open his eyes, the stars beyond the clouds would still be there.

They were there.

And then, there was something that wasn't all that different from the stars there, too.

"Aren't you cold?"

"I'm too hot."

Like usual, Taiga's voice was calm, cold, and unhappy. The freezing wind was exactly like the blueness of the blinking stars. Her flickering hair was a mess. He pulled the knit hood that had been against her back onto her head. Taiga let it happen without saying anything, but she pulled her hair out and pulled the hood down to the bottom of her eyes.

"So what were you actually doing?" As she said that, her face and hair were hidden by the hood, so he couldn't see them.

"I said I can't say."

It was probably good he couldn't see them.

"I see..."

As they exchanged words here and there, he warmed himself with the heat of his sighs. He slowly restored his body heat to his chilled core.

Both of them had their hands in their pockets. They were thirty centimeters apart. Even if they didn't hold hands, Taiga wouldn't go any further than that, and stayed beside Ryuuji. From below the hood, every once in a while, her eyes would glitter slightly as they walked step by step together.

Taiga. He said her name without making a sound.

Taiga—

Kitamura isn't a star.

He wasn't a mirage of something tens of thousands of light years away.

He was a person who, just like her, would also get lost and stop, but still walk forward under the light of the same stars.

There were stars that would someday fade, but Taiga, Ryuuji, Kitamura, and someone somewhere would see the same star fade. People would continue to look up at the same stars and would think of someone also looking at those stars. Then, they would keep walking.

So even Taiga wasn't alone. No matter how often she said, "I'll live on my own," there was someone who would be looking at the same stars she looked at—and even if the starry night inevitably changed, it would always still be there, and someone—right now, though it didn't amount to much, it was him—would also be looking up at them.

"Ryuuji. I'm a little hungry."

"Right. Do you want convenience store oden?"

There was a pause.

"...Yeah!"

Taiga's voice crossed the hush of the night.

The next day was Friday.

When he came to school, Kitamura Yuusaku's hair was dyed a lame pitch-black that could only be described as Maruo-esque. At the stairway of the shoe cupboards, he changed his shoes.

"Huh, that's Kitamura?"

"He's been rehabilitated."

"Which means...maybe?!"

The whispers crossed the halls, and Kitamura continued to slowly walk among them. There was somewhere he needed to be.

"Tomorrow is already voting day!"

"I'll follow anyone who doesn't vote all the way to the edge of hell...uh?"

Taiga and Ryuuji had mics in one hand and were going through their last day election speeches. But the two of them noticed Kitamura, and their words were suddenly stolen from them.

“Kitamura...”

“Kitamura-kun...”

Kitamura was smiling.

“Sorry. You two can stop. Actually, if you cause any more disorder, I won’t forgive you! Kitamura Yuusaku will lead this school down the right path!”

In that moment, with the same volume as the worry that had built up until that point, the students who had come to school gave Kitamura a grand applause. It was as though they were saying, *We were waiting!* The plants also clapped along with everyone else. Ami, who had just come to school, too, was only surprised for a second as the others filled her in. Goody-two-shoes face in place, she started clapping.

Kitamura had finally decided. As Ryuuji exchanged looks with his friend, he couldn’t stop an embarrassingly large smile from forming on his face. “No way, Takasu-kun’s snapped!” someone yelled, but Ryuuji’s expression didn’t change.

Chapter 6

He wasn't expecting the conversation at all.

"Wha?!"

Ryuuji returned an unblinking stare to the face of the spinster (aged 30) before him. After homeroom had ended, they had been called into the teacher's office, which was steeped in awkward silence.

"D-don't look at me with your eyes narrowed like that... You make me feel self-conscious about my wrinkles..."

"Oh, I'm not looking at those. But...is it true? Are you sure there hasn't been a mistake?"

"It's true. Kitamura-kun still hasn't submitted his candidate paperwork. There's a teacher from class A who's looking for a student who had said they would enter if Kitamura-kun didn't announce his candidacy. We're trying to get a handle on the circumstances."

"That must be Murase-kun, right? When we were talking at the lunch break, he was ecstatic and completely convinced Kitamura would enter."

"I see... Is Kitamura-kun still in the classroom?"

"Well, I came here as soon as I was called, so I'm not sure... Actually, you didn't have to go out of your way to call for me indirectly like that. Couldn't you have just asked him in here yourself?"

"I don't want to interrogate him in the classroom. Not in front of the people when they're happy about Kitamura-kun running. If I had asked, 'You haven't registered yet, but you're going to submit your candidacy right?' and made him answer yes or no right there, it would have definitely put pressure on him... hmm..."

The bachelorette must also have been bewildered. As she sat in her chair, she took a long and heavy breath. Then, she gave her back a good stretch. *Crick crack-crack*—the sound her back made was spectacular. Ryuuji felt the urge to

lower his head and thank her. The thirty-year-old-spinster-homeroom teacher had been at Kitamura's mercy just as much as Ryuuji—or rather, she might have had it even worse. After everything that happened with Kitamura, she was tired to the point her entire back was a creaking mess. She had been worried about so many things, and in the end, Kitamura didn't even turn in his candidacy forms.

Ryuuji wondered what was up with Kitamura's declaration from that morning. Even though Kitamura announced he was running, he might have actually had a change of heart. No—maybe he actually just forgot to turn in the form. It was too early to be jumping to conclusions. No matter how much Ryuuji let his imagination run wild, he would never reach the right answer without asking Kitamura himself.

“Anyway, I'll bring him here.”

“Please. According to the rules, if he doesn't turn in the forms by four, he won't be eligible for the election.”

With a hurried bow, Ryuuji flew out of the teacher's office. Just as he did that, a teacher called, “No running!” As a compromise Ryuuji continued with the longest strides he could muster at a hurried, restless pace. When he reached the hallway, he mixed into the students who were leaving school; he was the only one headed back to class. He took the stairs two at a time.

Ryuuji had completely believed Kitamura turned in the registration form already. Of course, the others must have thought the same thing. If Kitamura had already gone home, he didn't know what he would do.

“Whoa!”

“Hm? What's wrong, Takasu?”

You were here all along. The moment he opened the classroom door praying for just this eventuality, he found Kitamura all too obviously sitting in his seat, getting ready to go home. Just like that, Ryuuji felt exhausted. There were several other people who stayed behind in the classroom, but there was no sign of Taiga, Minori, or Noto.

“Wh-where are Taiga and the others?”

“They said something about a pancake café opening today at the train station. They joined up with Ami’s group and were all gung ho about going. It was like they were one huge family. Noto and Haruta were with them, too. They invited me, but I decided not to go. They didn’t know where you were, so they headed out without you. We’re the leftovers, huh?”

Ryuuji lost his voice in the face of Kitamura’s excessively normal and bright smile. He was unintentionally staring at that beaming face.

“Hey now, what’s wrong? Is there something on my face? Oh, I guess I’ve got a bandage on.” In an attempt at humor, Kitamura touched the lingering, painful-looking cut at the corner of his mouth.

With a sigh, Ryuuji muttered, “Well, I wouldn’t be in the mood to just pop into a café. Would you?”

“...”

At that moment, Kitamura’s smile quietly froze. When he saw that expression, Ryuuji understood. Kitamura hadn’t forgotten to turn in the paperwork.

Kitamura was still lost.

Seriously, what does this guy think he’s doing? He cradled his head and held back the gripe he had almost let loose. He endured the overbearing exhaustion he felt and tried to keep himself as composed as possible. He wouldn’t be helping anyone if he let himself get frustrated here. There wasn’t any point to coercing Kitamura into running for the election. It wasn’t as though getting Kitamura to run was the right thing to do. It wasn’t the solution to Kitamura’s complex and unmanageable feelings.

It wasn’t a matter of Kitamura making the right choice between running for student council president or not. It was a matter of Kitamura making a choice. Neither choice was right or wrong. That was probably why he continued to hesitate for so long. He was probably trying to come up with an answer, like he was pulling a string from within his own body.

But they were coming down against the clock.

“The spinster said registration closes at four.”

Ryuuji looked at the clock. The hands were pointing at three forty. There were twenty minutes left.

“What are you going to do? Are you actually going to leave it like this?”

He didn’t want to say anything more intrusive. He didn’t want to say anything, but really he—

“Let’s go home, Takasu.”

“Wha?!”

Kitamura’s reply came so readily, he was struck dumb.

“My fellow leftovers, let’s go home.”

Ryuuji had misread the situation. Kitamura hadn’t been hesitating. He had wholeheartedly decided that he wasn’t entering the election.

“G-go home? Are you sure? Everyone thinks you’re entering the election. Are you serious about this?”

“I changed my mind. I thought about it for the whole day and decided I definitely don’t want to do it.”

“You still have twenty more minutes to think it over...”

“It’s fine. I don’t want to think about it. Don’t make me repeat myself anymore. Come on, get ready to go. I’ll wait for you.”

“Kitamura...”

He wasn’t able to say another word beyond that. Kitamura had already settled on a choice. If that was the case, there was nothing more he could say.

Pressed on by Kitamura, Ryuuji prepared to go home. He took up his bag and remembered Taiga still had his scarf from that morning. They opened the door and went into the hallway. He couldn’t help but feel slight panic in Kitamura’s place. Was it really okay, after getting to this point? Was it really fine?

No, he knew well enough that there wasn’t any use in panicking. If Kitamura himself didn’t know whether this was good or bad, Ryuuji couldn’t ever know, no matter how much he thought it over. On the other hand, Kitamura was too composed.

“It’s been a while since we’ve gone home together, Takasu. Between student council and clubs...I guess we haven’t walked home together since our first year?”

“Right, I guess it has been that long. Right...”

“How about we stop by somewhere in commemoration? We should avoid the station since Ami and the others are there. How about we go to pseudobucks? I’m not really interested in sissy things like a pancake café anyway.”

As Kitamura started to briskly walk, Ryuuji watched his back. After a while, Ryuuji let out the breath he had been holding in. He gave up.

Yes, the truth was Ryuuji had wanted to see Kitamura become the student council president. He wanted to see his friend in the student council and acting like a demonic coach in his own element. He had thought it would definitely suit Kitamura. He thought Kitamura would have been a great president. However, Kitamura had made his decision. It wasn’t as though Ryuuji could decide he didn’t want to find out where the story would lead from that decision. He couldn’t abandon Kitamura as he continued down that road.

Ryuuji decided he would see where Kitamura would end up. He decided to continue being Kitamura’s friend in the life he had chosen.

All right, he thought as he jogged after Kitamura. The two boys walked together uncomfortably, side by side.

“Right, men go to pseudobucks. I’ll get black coffee and a chili dog.”

“That’s Takasu—you keep things simple. I’ll have coffee, too, and cinnamon toast... No, that’s too girly. I’ll go with cheese toast.”

“Good choice. Men don’t have cream after school.”

“That’s right! And we don’t put steamed milk in our coffee!”

“We don’t need it at all! We get black coffee and look at that pseudobuck’s gramp’s annoying face!”

“Right, Sudoh-san’s face! Me, I’m going to read a sports magazine!”

“Right, I will too!”

They were talking big.

“Right on!”

Ryuuji and Kitamura raised their arms and left the classroom in step. As they walked down the hallway without talking about anything that would bring them down, Ryuuji thought, *whatever would be would be*.

He wasn't giving into despair at all, or to desperation. It was just one truth.

Everything could only become what it was supposed to become. No matter what they thought about or what they worried about, in the end, they could only continue walking and see where they ended up. They would make decisions in succession, one step at a time. Even the destination that they arrived at, the result of those decisions, was just another stop where they would need to decide something else. The direction they headed was only the place they had decided to go, and only the one who had decided to head there could go down it.

Faced with all those choices, people sometimes lost their courage and wanted to escape. But excuses were no good. No matter how tough the long journey could become, no matter how useless it seemed, it would still be the road you chose. It was a road you forged as you went. Even if it was a meager trail, you couldn't do it over, and you couldn't blame it on someone else. No matter how full of dissatisfaction you were, you walked along that road alone, and no one could change it for you.

“Aah...it's been a while. The sunset's pretty.”

“Yeah...”

He believed.

He believed that no matter which road Kitamura chose to take, no matter where the road ended up, it would be right for Kitamura. Kitamura would go ahead to make a path for himself where the right or wrong choice didn't matter.

Kitamura narrowed his eyes in the hallway, which was dyed in glaring orange. He cast his gaze out the window. He had come to a halt, probably because of how beautiful the sunset was.

“Right... I haven’t walked home with you for over a full year. Realizing that is a pretty big shock. I had club activities, but the student council activities I had every day were an even bigger factor in that.”

“After that bus tour in May when we sat together and started talking, you joined the student council pretty quick.”

“Yeah, that’s right. How nostalgic... Yeah, we hadn’t talked to each other until May either. You were miserable and on edge.”

“Of course I was. There were already rumors spreading from the entrance ceremony that I had a criminal record. Even you believed that—you were keeping away from me.”

“No, no way. Nuh-uh. I was caught up in something else right after the entrance ceremony. I wasn’t paying attention to anybody in the class. Ah, right. I haven’t told you about what happened then. I didn’t think there was anything to talk about, though...”

In the light of the sunset, Kitamura suddenly headed toward the bulletin board.

There, Taiga’s jet-black, ominous campaign posters were pinned up in a line. Kitamura gently removed one poster’s thumbtack and rescued the paper that had been hidden beneath. In prominent and masculine ink-brushed letters, it had just a single message: “Don’t run. –The Student Council.” He returned the poster to its rightful place and shifted it so that “Don’t run.” was visible.

As he watched Kitamura’s hands, Ryuuji listened to Kitamura’s voice.

“Right when we had just entered school, I was super excited. I wanted to have that so-called high school debut. I didn’t have a great junior high experience, so I decided I would have as much fun as I could in the new world I was in.”

“Oh...”

“When you think of a fun high school life, you end up wanting a girlfriend, right? Right then, there was a rumor of a super pretty girl in another class. She’d come from a famous private girl’s junior high school, and she seemed like she was super ladylike. It got me thinking, so I went out of my way to see her and...it was completely love at first sight. She was so cute, and I thought that if I

got to know a girl that cute, my life would be rosy. But while I was watching her, I noticed all the guys who had gone to confess to her had come back crying. Supposedly, she would shower them with terrible insults and pretend to threaten them with violence to the point she would ruin each guy's pride. Oh, do you get it already? Do you know who I'm talking about?"

"Well, just keep going..."

He couldn't say, *I already knew that*. Ryuuji just hid his face and looked back at Kitamura's thin glasses frames, which were reflecting the orange light.

"I was elated. I couldn't imagine what that beautiful girl would do, but I definitely wanted to know. So, one day, Aisaka—oh, I let it slip. Well, it's fine. Right, I went to visit Aisaka at her class. I said excuse me, and I checked to make sure no one else was on the stairway landing. Then, I said, 'You're beautiful!' I confessed my honest feelings to her. Then Aisaka yelled, 'You're gross!' and she got me with this amazing left straight hook. She stopped just a millimeter away from my nose. When her fist stopped, there was this sound from the wind blowing by... It was the first time I'd met a girl like that, and I was completely moved. I got scared and fell on my butt, but I got up. Then I said one more time, 'It's okay! I dig that straight punch!' And bared myself to her. I reached out my hands like this. Then, Aisaka must have thought I was attacking her. She didn't hesitate for even a second. She just went 'Die, you pervert!' ...That time she got me with a right hook. She didn't stop right before hitting me that time; she came at me, aiming for my internal organs, under my ribs. I couldn't get up that time, of course, and ended up sitting at the stairs and listening to Aisaka walk away."

"How violent... Actually, you really are pitiful, aren't you..."

"That's right, I was pitiful back then. It hurt, and she also completely hated me. My rosy high school life was getting further and further away. I was down. Then that person was there. She appeared from the shadows of the stairs. It was Kanou Sumire. 'I saw everything, freshman. You got rejected, right? It's fine, your high school life has just started. Come to the student council! We always have a mountain of easy desk work; you can get busy with getting yourself on your feet again!' Before I knew it, she had taken me to the student council room. That's actually the same technique we use at the student council."

There aren't many people who want to join general affairs every year, so you go fishing for some new student who's having a tough time. And she caught me good."

He said "we" when he was talking about the student council, but Kitamura didn't notice his slip of the tongue as he turned his gaze to the setting sky.

"She hooked me, I joined the council, and then...and now I'm here. I became friends with Aisaka. That rosy dream I wanted so badly came true. We've eaten lunch together, gone on a trip to the ocean together, danced together at the culture festival...and right, Aisaka even told me that she likes me. Well, even when she said she liked me, what she really wanted to tell me was something else—"

Kitamura grinned and looked at Ryuuji.

"Well, it's fine. It's not something for me to say. It's just that it was getting fun. Every day was really fun, and though I don't have a girlfriend, my high school life has definitely become rosy. When the president talked to me, took me by the arm, and led me away, that uncertain first step I took wasn't in vain. From there, from that one step, that's when all the fun started. I definitely think that. But..."

Suddenly he stopped talking. Kitamura's smile disappeared as though it had been blown away.

It wasn't that he wouldn't walk—he couldn't walk. He was eloquently talking about his feet, which had come to a halt. Even though he had decided to leave aside the election and go home with Ryuuji, he still couldn't move forward.

He was supposed to have made his one choice, but he couldn't step forward to get to that place.

Then, the rest of what he said might have been just for himself.

"It's not that I don't want to become the president. It's just that I don't want to part with her. But no matter how much I hate it, and no matter how I whine about it, time doesn't stop. Reality won't change. In the end...I haven't prepared myself to choose whether to become president or not. In all honesty...to be completely honest, I just want to run away from it. I can't accept that the

president is going to be gone. I want to run away to a world where that won't happen. But that world doesn't exist."

Ryuuji looked at the top of his friend's bowed head. He couldn't find anything to say but simply stood beside Kitamura's paralyzed form.

"There's nowhere to run. I have to make do with this world, with reality. In order to do that, I have to accept reality and keep going forward. I know that. But...I can't step forward. My legs freeze. I can't move because I hate it so much. It's too hard to accept the reality that follows this. It didn't go the way I wanted it to. I know that I have to keep going. But I don't want to take a step towards it. I can't stop the flow of time. It's always that... Just stupid things like that..."

The light of dusk faintly hurt the back of his eyes.

Kitamura got choked up on his words, and as though he had even lost the power to stand, he sat down.

Was it right for Ryuuji to tell him it would be fine? Ryuuji also choked on his words. *It'll be fine because the damage from your broken heart will eventually disappear*—was he supposed to say that, even though it felt wrong? Or was he supposed to say, *the day will come when the patriarch will eventually notice how great you are and turn your way*. Or something else?

No. He knew that had to be wrong.

Someone who knew well enough that they needed to step out into the real world, but stood around paralyzed and blaming himself, didn't need words of comfort or something to give him courage. What he needed wasn't that, but—

"Whoa!"

In surprise, he raised his voice.

A long shadow stretched over from Kitamura as he crouched. The shadow wrapped itself around him like an embrace, but the person who owned the shadow wasn't smiling sweetly.

Instead, the person only looked over at Ryuuji and raised a slight eyebrow. It was as though they were saying, "What a mess."

“Yo. You idiot.”

“...”

Ryuuji could see Kitamura’s shoulders shake.

Unable to turn around, like a defenseless child, Kitamura continued to expose his rounded back to the girl he loved.

“I’ve been walking around looking for someone down in the dumps to hook them—have you seen anybody? We’ve got quite a workload with the vice president suddenly disappearing on us.”

“I haven’t seen anyone. Actually, right now, I’ve got a super funny face on.”

“Can’t fool me. What you’re saying sounds down in the dumps.”

“I’m very sorry about that...”

“If you’re sorry, then put those foul feet down somewhere. It doesn’t matter where. If you’ve got enough time to think about how you’re down, you might as well finish planting that foot you’ve got raised somewhere.”

BAM! As though she were modeling it for him, Kanou Sumire stomped her foot right behind Kitamura’s butt. Kitamura’s shoulders quivered again at the sound and the force of her frightful foot.

“Or is it that you’ve decided to abandon the kids who’ve been waiting and believing in you and following behind you, Kitamura Yuusaku? Are you the type of man who can do that? Huh? Have the last two years been that trivial to you? Do you really not need this anymore? Your feelings—your foot is up, isn’t it? You raised it in order to take a step, didn’t you? Where are you planning on planting that foot? Is it not going forward? You thinking of running away backwards or to the side? Isn’t your path forward? Huh?! Have you just been spending your life in that blockheaded pose, worrying and thinking about how to stop time and escape from reality when you can’t do anything about those things?! Are you an idiot?!”

Her voice was low and intimidating, and there was no falter in Sumire’s words. Ryuuji heard them loud and clear. Kitamura must have heard them, too.

Sumire was telling him one thing. To put it simply, she had one thing to say.

“There’s a place you want to go, isn’t there?! There is, so you’re hesitating, aren’t you?! Someone who doesn’t have a place they want to go wouldn’t hesitate about whether to go or not! You’re scared because you can see where you’re headed! You know that better than anyone! You’ve already decided it in your gut! Anyway, you can put that foot down! What else is there to do?!”

GO!

Go! Go! Go! Go forward, walk, run!

Go down the path of Kitamura Yuusaku already!

Don’t stop here!

Go!

That was all Kanou Sumire was shouting.



“I’m watching you go. I’m watching to see what kind of president you become. I’m watching to see how you lead everyone at school. No matter how far I am, I’m watching. Don’t be idle. There isn’t anyone who can fool these all-seeing eyes!”

“I...”

She thrust a single piece of paper at his back. It read Student Council President—Notice of Candidacy.

Right, Ryuuji thought.

When someone was reluctant to move forward and dawdling, what they needed wasn’t a supporting hand or comfort—it was a voice that would push them from behind and tell them, *GO!* They needed a force that was strong enough to send them flying forward, something so strong it might even hurt. That was the way to bring the courage out of them.

“Bye.”

Kanou Sumire put on a masculine grin and gave Ryuuji a single wave. She didn’t turn back as she took long strides away from them. She walked as she usually did, without faltering, and left them. She kept moving forward.

The sunset was still blinding, to the point that they couldn’t open their eyes against the dancing orange light. The patriarch’s back was enveloped in the strong light and immediately became impossible to follow.

But even so.

“Ahhh...now...how can I put this... What time is it now?”

“It’s 3:58.”

“Of course. A super star only comes when it’s most exciting.”

Kitamura took the paper entrusted to him by Sumire and found a way to stand.

Like on a certain night, he looked up at the heavens in the same pose he had once before and took off his glasses. He rubbed roughly at his eyes and combed down his bangs.

“Sorry, I’ve got something I need to do in a rush, so I don’t think I can make it to pseudobucks.”

He firmly put his glasses back in place.

There Kitamura Yuusaku—his friend who was the same as ever—stood with his usual sincerity.

“Right. Too bad. Oh well, next time then.”

“Yeah. We’ll definitely do it next time.”

It would turn out however it would turn out. Ryuuji smiled as he looked back at Kitamura.

This time, Kitamura went down the same hallway Sumire had left through. He seemed a little nervous, but he didn’t run, staying at a brisk walking pace. He was probably heading alone to the teacher’s room. The bachelorette must be waiting anxiously for Kitamura even now.

Do it, Ryuuji muttered and then headed in the opposite direction. He turned his back and took his own step. That was an exaggeration. He was just heading home.

Everyone was going home alone. They were each choosing their own paths and going forward.

This was good. That wasn’t a lonely thing in the slightest.

Everyone had a place they needed to go. Everyone would walk it alone. They would choose their own paths, and go. Sometimes they would cross paths and sometimes they would be side by side, and at other times they would go separate ways, and they might see each other again at some point. Or they might not.

Above everyone’s heads, the same stars of Orion that they had found that night would continue glittering on. Whether they could or couldn’t see them, they would always be there, unchanging.

When he lost his path, when he lost the strength to stand, when he thought he couldn’t walk any longer, he would know that everyone came to that crossroads in their life at some point. Ryuuji thought he would look to the

heavens when that time came for him, too.

He would look up at the stars glittering in the distance and would think about someone else who was looking at the same stars. No matter how far away it was, even if it was a distance that couldn't be run, the stars they looked at would definitely be one and the same. Believing in that would give him strength.

The night would brighten and morning would come. In the morning when the stars weren't visible, the blue of the sky was exactly the color of ice. It was an incredibly cold and clear morning. The chilling winter winds had blown away the clouds.

"It's...cold! Why is the gym colder indoors than outside in the winter?!"

"Well, it really is cold, but try going outside. It's got to be colder than in here... whoaa..."

Ryuuji's teeth chattered from the cold along with Noto's. He stood unintentionally pigeon-toed, his back rounded like a cat's to make his body smaller, and he had both his hands stuffed desperately into his pockets. He couldn't do anything about the numbness.

At the time when every student of every year and every class would normally be separated into long homerooms, they decided to have the student council presidential election. The students assembled at the gym, shivering. "C-c-c-c-c-cold." "B-b-b-b-b-brrr." The more freezing it was, the more silent it was, and in the chill, the shivering went on. The girls clustered, sticking together in friendly groups to keep warm. That was fine, but Ryuuji wanted to tell the guys to stop. *It's so cold*, they said as they folded their arms. The sight of their pimply faces drawing near each other made a chill go down his spine.

Anyway, that day was truly cold. It was cold, it was noisy, and they had to stay

standing. It was taking a while to start, and the shivering students couldn't get excited over it when it was like this. Well, in the summer, it would have been like a sauna, of course, and if they had been sitting, their butts would have been so painfully cold, they'd have felt like dying. In actuality, there wasn't any good that would come from having an event in the gym.

But everyone from class 2-C was still in that place and shivering, too. They didn't plan to sneak out and skip it. They were sincere as they looked up at the stage.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauuuh..."

A low wail that sounded inhuman started up. Taiga had stolen Ryuuji's scarf that day, too. She brought it up to her nose, reducing her to a mysteriously masked figure. Clinging to Taiga, Minori locked limbs with her; she was fully outfitted with her skirt, jacket, and tracksuit in warmth. Maya and Nanako wore matching sweaters in different colors, pulling the hems down to their limits to wring a little more warmth out of them. Ami had her hands stuck into her jacket pockets, and it seemed like she was handling something desperately—probably a disposable heat pack. She had forgotten her goody-two-shoes iron mask and there were wrinkles on her forehead. She was earnestly trying to survive the cold.

What the students from 2-C were looking up at was a lone boy who stood on the stage.

His hair, which had been dyed back to dandy black, looking trimmed and glossy, was fully Maruo-esque. His glasses were polished till they glittered, and his pursed lips seemed trustworthy. Though there was still the painful looking cut at the edge of his lips, Kitamura stood there with bright eyes.

He had prepared himself to stand and face reality. His face seemed relieved, even as he prepared to accept the pain that would come along with it.

"Uh. Uhh, the mic... Whoa, it's on. Sorry to keep you waiting."

A first-year boy from the student council who was going to do the proceedings finally appeared. *You're late! It's cold!* Unreasonable heckling flew at him. But there were odd people around who started up a strangely enthusiastic round of applause that Ryuuji joined in on. The cold gym was filled

with a sudden heat by the seriousness of class 2-C.

“Uhh, with that, we’ll proceed with the election of the new student council president. As for candidates, we have the vice president Kitamura Yuusaku-san from class 2-C and no one else.”

Yahooooo! Kitamura smiled painfully at the awkward cheer from those in his class and motioned for them to settle down with a wave of his hand. The student council members, who were lined up below the stage, with Kanou Sumire among them, looked strangely happy as they smiled.

“So then, Kitamura-senpai! Please give your election speech!”

“Yes!” Kitamura walked straight for the mic. With practiced movements, he casually adjusted the mic stand that had been set a little too low.

“Maruo! You can do it!”

“Kitamuraaaa! Thanks for saving the school from the Palmtop Tiger!”

The smile and nod that he met the cheers with seemed incredibly trustworthy. In addition, the aura he had was that of a spick and span second year, and his earnestly put together face seemed dazzling. It might have been because he had shown his flaws, but anyway, at that moment Kitamura seemed incredibly reliable.

Ryuuji put his numb hands on his chest like a maiden. *Looking good, Kitamura*, he thought. His chest was warm. Kitamura must have prepared himself to part ways with her. There was not a single bit of grief or delusion in his gaze. This was the power of someone who had cast aside those things and decided to only face in the direction of progress.

“I’ve already been introduced. I am Kitamura Yuusaku. I—no I—”

He grabbed the mic with his right hand.

Yes, go. Ryuuji thought it as hard as he could, as though he were pushing Kitamura’s back.

Everyone in the class, everyone in the student council including Kanou Sumire, and all the students who had prayed for Kitamura to run, had to have been holding their breath like Ryuuji. *Tell him to go*, he thought. *Give them an*

amazing speech that'll make them envision a fun and bright high school life. Make it clear once and for all who would make the best president. Show them it's Kitamura Yuusaku—make that clear to the entire school.

“I—”

Kitamura raised his face. He opened his mouth. He took a big breath and then turned to every student in the school... No, that wasn't it.

“I LOVE YOU PREEEEESIIIIIIIDEEEEENNNTTT!”

He turned to just one girl, summoning the loudest voice he could muster.



“The reason I’m able to stand here now is because I’ve loved a person like you! I understand that I can’t match you the way I am right now! I know that I have to forget about you now that you’re moving far away! But really, no matter what, I wanted to tell you that! Your voice and your words have always supported me! And I want to ask you! I want to ask you president...whether you have feelings for me even in the slightest! Even now, when I know I should be giving up, I definitely can’t just let go of my feelings! I’m begging you! Somehow—somehow—somehow! Please tell me! Do I have zero hope?! Is there really, actually no special bond between us?!”

Kitamura yelled, his face red as he bowed towards Sumire.

Suddenly, Ryuuji’s head was blank.

And all the students’ mouths were open.

It wasn’t just the students but the faculty. The bachelorette, too. Even Haruta. Everyone had their eyes wide open and were repeating what had just happened in their heads. Not a single person was following the sudden confession. Yes, no one—not even Taiga. Ryuuji looked at Taiga where she stood just a little ahead of him. Taiga was frozen to the spot, and he didn’t know what to make of her expression. Everyone started stirring, but Taiga was the only one who couldn’t move.

“A confession?”

“That was a confession just now, wasn’t it?!”

“What? What does this mean?! He confessed to the patriarch?!”

The commotion gradually turned to elation, and Kitamura, who was gritting his teeth, slowly took on a color in his cheeks that was an unordinary red. What was he doing just turning red like that? Ryuuji couldn’t move yet, either.

Kitamura had finally put down his hesitant foot. The choice that he had made wasn’t what Ryuuji had expected. It wasn’t to run in the election. It seemed it was to change the reality that was too hard for him to accept.

In his death throes, after hating and being too afraid of what was ahead of his choice, he had decided instead to try to change it. He wasn’t trying to escape

reality, but he wouldn't accept it as it was. He had decided to fight it. That was the type of man Kitamura Yuusaku was.

How would this end up? How would this change the future?

"Patriarch! Answer him!"

"Right, tell him!"

"Bring the mic over here!"

The ones who were amused by the situation had at some point seized the mic from the hands of the dumbfounded student council, who were standing stock-still in shock. They put the mic up to Sumire's mouth like an entertainment reporter.

Sumire looked up at Kitamura on the platform. Their eyes met, and Kitamura was red to his ears, but Sumire's face didn't change color. She had her eyebrows raised as usual, as though she had just heard a funny joke.

"It seems that's the case..."

She very calmly answered into the mic.

She turned her eyes away from Kitamura. She turned to the excited students and shrugged as though she had run into an inconvenience, then smiled.

"How's that? That's the vice president, Kitamura Yuusaku, that you all know. Isn't he a riot? If someone as interesting as that becomes president, this school's in for a treat. Give him your sincere vote!"

At that spectacular punchline, an applause erupted. Kitamura's confession was lost like an errant piece of discarded trash as it was pulled into the whirlwind of voices. The gym was wrapped in a roar of laughter.

"I'll vote for him!"

"Me too, me too."

It seemed that Kitamura, who had no opponents, was getting even more votes.

Ahh.

Very intentionally, Kitamura dramatically looked up and held his head in his

arms. He had confessed in front of the whole school and gotten a speech in his support as a response. In the end, he didn't know whether he had been rejected or not. At that punchline, he pitifully leaned on the mic stand. Theatrically, he lowered his head. He curled back into an impressive ball, as though the scenario had been determined to end like that from the start.

Kitamura's feelings had been smashed to smithereens until there was nothing left, cleanly erased. He'd lost the fight he had challenged himself to—to change reality.

Even then, as he lowered his face and seemed to hug the mic stand, his shoulders seemed like they were close to shaking from tears. There were probably others beyond Ryuuji who realized that. There might have been...

In the great commotion, Haruta, who had casually been on standby at the bottom of the stage, helped Kitamura down, supporting his shoulders. Noto was at the bottom of the stairs, too, and lent his shoulder to keep people from seeing Kitamura's back. Kitamura still couldn't lift his face up. He couldn't do it. Taiga couldn't move, either.

The vote came after that. Each classroom had an appointed form. Ryuuji, however, was thinking about what he needed to do.

What could he do right now for the friend who walked under the same stars and who had been hurt? He thought of the illusion of the night sky in his heart, and his face stiffened.

“Kanou-senpai!”

The hallways and stairs leading back to the classrooms were packed to the point that there were traffic jams in progress all over. Regardless, Ryuuji desperately chased a certain girl's back to the highest story of the school building where he normally never ventured. He stepped into the hallway where

the third-year classrooms were lined up.

She might have heard Ryuuji. She was surrounded by her classmates, but Sumire turned around even as they were headed in. She looked at Ryuuji's face and raised a hand at him. *Yo.*

"What is this?! Kanou, you're not getting another confession are you?!"

"Shut up, get into the classroom and don't make a fuss. I'm heading out for a bit."

She responded to her classmate's joke with her usual masculine smile. Then she approached Ryuuji and stopped him from opening his mouth.

"This place is a little too busy. Can't hear a thing. Come this way."

The place she led him to was the landing of the stairs to the roof. The din of the higher-ranked students still reached them, but their voices carried better than they had in the hallway.

"So? What's wrong, Takasu?"

"Why didn't you give him a real answer?"

Sumire bore into him with her strong eyes. She had her legs spread as she stood imposingly. She was as composed as a king. Without saying a thing, she simply waited for Ryuuji to continue. She wouldn't be shaken by Ryuuji's gaze, but he had to face her.

"Why did you run away like that? Weren't you the one telling Kitamura to put his foot down yesterday? You told him to keep going forward. Weren't you the one who told him that? How can you talk big and then run away so easily?"

No one was going to ask her why she hadn't shouted that she loved him back. If she didn't like him, no one could do anything about it. But that wasn't what this was. What Ryuuji couldn't forgive was that Sumire hadn't caught someone who had jumped straight at her. She hadn't pushed him back, either. She'd avoided making a choice, and as that person was falling, she had run away and watched from a safe place.

Sumire had been the one, after all, to tell Kitamura to go forward, to push him forward more than anyone. She had denied him the ability to stand still or run

away. She had been the person who gave him the courage to continue.

“I just wanted to tell him to enter as a candidate. I didn’t ask him to confess to me. You heard everything, too.”

“Are you really going to run away like that again?”

“Is running away such a bad thing? Being direct is great, but someone who is stupidly honest and only knows how to keep moving forward is going to wind up in awkward situations. I think Kitamura would do well learning to be smarter and more adaptable. And you as well.”

“Smart... You mean like you?!”

It seemed that Ryuuji’s fangs, which he had sunk into the upperclassman he faced, were so painless to Sumire that she could brush them off with a thin smile.

“That’s right. He needs to be smart like me, skillful like me, and to run away when necessary like me. That’s the right way to do things. Learn whatever you need to get to this point. Whether you can or can’t do it is the difference between us.”

As though it were a joke, she pointed at her own head to show she still had more to spare. She continued to keep a smile on her beautiful face. He didn’t have anything to reply with. He wanted to disagree, but he couldn’t. It wasn’t because Sumire was completely right, but because Ryuuji had lost the ability to think clearly. He was frustrated. He couldn’t help but be frustrated when he and Kitamura were being mocked like that.

Not everyone can become like you, he thought.

You have everything, after all.

He turned to the sky and held back his tears. Nothing was certain except the light of the stars. It wasn’t as though someone who could easily run off into a rocket aimed toward God and destined for space could understand the frustrations and suffering of those who desperately walked the bare earth beside him.

But he couldn’t put that into words. Everything that happened that day, that

happened to him and his friends, to Kitamura and Taiga, to everyone, overflowed and blocked his throat. If he only had the strength to blow it all away. Everything was frustrating, and Ryuuji could only gnash his teeth in vain like a creature in chains.

Seeing him act like that, Sumire's eyebrows softened slightly.

"Anyway, you're a good friend, Takasu Ryuuji. I wanted to get to know you better. I regret that I didn't, but time has run out. Goodbye. Be close to Kitamura from here on out. Make sure he doesn't get used by a cunning snake like me again. Goodbye..."

That was it.

Her eyes were quiet and understanding. Sumire wasn't upset at all by Ryuuji's glare as she lightly shrugged and turned her heel. She turned her back to him without hesitation. Following her parting words, she started walking away. For a moment, Ryuuji didn't realize he was being left behind. In a stupor, he watched her leave.

No, this was no good.

Unable to prepare any words to say back, his feet naturally followed after her. This wasn't a joke, this wasn't a point where she could just say goodbye. Like he would let her tie things up this cleanly and then make an exit this grandly. If it all went down the way Sumire wanted, she would leave them to go become the center of a new world where she would continue in a new story. What would happen to the unfulfilled feelings of side character A, who had been left behind in the old world? Once he was out of sight and forgotten, was he out of mind?

Like he would let that happen!

"..."

Right as Sumire disappeared into her classroom, a warm lump hit Ryuuji right in his stomach. When he looked down, he saw the pale whorl of the top of someone's head right around chest level. That person had run into Ryuuji and was trying to push him back.

"T-Taiga!"

She kept pushing him until his back was against the wall of the landing. Her arms kept them apart. Taiga didn't raise her face. Her hands were still fused to his body as she stood her ground. Ryuuji grabbed her strangely strong arms in an attempt to push her off, but she pushed them away. For a while, they struggled against each other without saying anything.

"Taiga! Why are you stopping me?! I'm doing this for Kitamura. I'm—"

"Kitamura-kun was crying. Can you go be with him? Ryuuji, please. Please be by Kitamura-kun's side right now."

"Ta—"

Taiga raised her face. *You're the one who's crying*, he thought. After being in love with Kitamura for so long, after having such strong but one-sided feelings for him, and after having them shattered in that moment, Taiga had to have been crying. All of that would be in her eyes.

"It can't be me. I can't stay by his side."

But as she looked up at Ryuuji, he could see from up close they weren't even teary. They had a silver light to them and didn't so much as quiver. Even though she knew everything now, they were resolute as they inescapably zeroed in on Ryuuji.

"Are you sure you're fine with that? Are you okay, even with how everything turned out?"

"I'm fine. It's fine."

Her slightly dry lips were smiling like soft flower petals. Then, like she had the other night, she stood on tiptoe and wound Ryuuji's scarf around its owner's neck. She wrapped it twice from the front and tied it in a stupid-looking knot right under his chin. She gave him a pat.

"It's fine...so go to Kitamura-kun. Run. Don't look back, and go straight there."

"What are you going to do? What are you going to do once you're alone?"

"I'm fine being alone. I'll be there right after you, so do it. Please."

Her cold hands suddenly grabbed both of Ryuuji's hands. Like the waltz they hadn't danced in front of the campfire on that night, she turned him around

with the weight of her body.

“Go.”

For just a moment, he thought he felt her round forehead against his back. He didn't have the time to check before Taiga thrust him forward with both her hands, *BAM!* Then her voice echoed to him: *Just run. Don't turn back.* He hesitated, but his feet started running. Ryuuji ran to his crying friend, who had so easily lost a fight of his own making.

After sending Ryuuji off, Taiga watched until she could no longer see his running form. Then she closed her eyes for a bit.

She did think she liked Kitamura. It was past the time for adoring him; it was past the time for being self-conscious about it. She had been in turmoil, though no one knew it, but she thought she still liked him. She knew that knowing that he liked another girl wouldn't make those feelings disappear.

When she realized the laws of the world—that what she wanted would never be in her hands—and she froze in place, he came to hold her empty hands. He said her name gently and reached out to her empty heart. Then he chose to be by her side. He was the person who had chosen her.

He was such a kind person. She could never have thanked him enough.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. There was no longer anyone in the hallway. All the students had returned to their classrooms; they were probably enjoying the one time a year they got to play election without any teachers around.

She wanted to do what Kitamura had done for her, but she hadn't been able to. She couldn't stay by his side. After knowing that the person he wanted there beside him wasn't her, after knowing that the person who should have been there wasn't her, she couldn't be with him anymore. She was afraid of being hurt. She couldn't be by his side supporting him, all while accepting the truth. That was her weakness. She was so weak it was out of the question.

But no matter how weak she was, she wanted to do what she could, even if she couldn't hold his cold hand like he had for her. She wanted to do something, no matter how far apart the two of them really were.

The only things Taiga had given Kitamura so far were burnt failures of fried eggs and a clumsy stuffed animal to commemorate a home run.

But there was something she could give him starting now.

Taiga slowly reached her right hand towards the back of her neck. Her hands checked for the deadly contraband that stuck out of her uniform collar but was hidden by her hair. Ryuuji hadn't noticed it. She unsheathed it from her back. Maybe she was in the wrong. She might have been. She didn't know.

All she knew was that once she started walking, she couldn't stop.

She couldn't stop anymore.

She cultivated the explosive rage that made every hair on her body stand on end. She let it devour her weakness and use it for nourishment. Even when the taste of iron spread in her mouth from the cheek she had bit too hard, even when her ragged breathing made her nostrils flare grossly, even when she scowled to the point it hurt, she couldn't stop anymore. She couldn't do anything about the pure rage that had obscured her eyes. She wouldn't be able to get rid of it until she had beaten the person she couldn't forgive. She ordered her legs to get her there faster before she was fully consumed by her expanding rage.

Walk faster, she thought. Don't trip. Take me straight to her.

She stood in front of the door. There was no hesitation in her hand as she threw open the door so hard it seemed close to breaking. *BAAM!* The upperclassmen looked at her with round eyes.

"KANOU...SUMIREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

Blood was in her voice as she bellowed. *The Palmtop Tiger?! What's she doing here?!* She also yelled at the ones standing to their feet.

"It's a FIIIIIIIIIIIGGGGGHHHHTTTT! Kanou Sumire, come OOOOOOUUUUUUUUTTTT!"

She swung around her wooden sword. She overturned desks, and someone screamed. People she never laid eyes on before fled in droves. But she wouldn't stop. She wouldn't stop until that person came out.

“Now this is quite the commotion. So there was another knuckleheaded idiot left among us.”

“I’m gonna kill you after what you did to my friend! You coward! I won’t forgive you...ever!”

Of her own free will, that person slowly approached the hole Taiga had opened up. Taiga swung her wooden sword in a wide, full circle as though she were showing everyone that she would kill anyone who stood in her way. Then, she pointed the tip of the sword right at Sumire’s nose.

“I’ll never forgive you. Even if you don’t face me, and try to run, I’ll follow you. I’ll never, ever let you go.”

“Don’t worry. Who said I’m running? Okay, I’ll take you on.”

A sword! she said, and someone among the circle of third years watching them threw her a bamboo sword that was still in its cover. Sumire caught it with one hand and undid the string tying it with learned motions.

“Running is one piece of wisdom. When it’s appropriate to run, you run. I think that’s correct. If I wanted to run from here, that would be easy. Today, though, I’ll face you of my own will. Aisaka Taiga...I will personally beat the stupidity out of you. I’ll teach you some manners. This whole world is teeming with idiots. I’ve had just about enough of it. You came at just the right time.”

“Hah!”

Taiga didn’t hold back on the girl who underestimated her. She thrust the tip of her sword forward. Sumire brushed it aside, and their eyes met.

“Too bad, so sad... Now, I’ve got brains, and my looks are nothing to scoff at, but I also have good reflexes. That, and I hold ranks in both kendo and aikido.”

Well then, Taiga thought. She smiled. That was quite impressive. She’d thought the fight would end too fast, but it seemed she would be able to take her time enjoying it.

When the classroom door suddenly burst open, everyone in class 2-C snapped up to look at the doorway. Ryuuji, Noto, and Haruta looked up as they occupied the seats next to Kitamura, who had his face down and didn't have anything to say. Maya and Nanako, who had left Kitamura to the boys in favor of watching from a distance, turned to the door. Minori, who was about to go to the bathrooms to find her friend, stared, as did Ami.

"Where's that delinquent Takasu?! Hurry and come with me! Please, you've got to do something about this!"

"...Huh?"

Several upperclassmen were panting raggedly in the doorway. When they caught sight of Ryuuji, they jumped in, grabbed him by the arm, and started pulling him out of the classroom.

"Uh, uh, um, what?! What's going—"

"Your partner the Palmtop Tiger went over to beat up Kanou! It's a mess!"

Huuh? He didn't understand what was going on and was about to ask them to repeat what they had said, but his body was already up. He didn't need the upperclassmen to lend him a hand. He was already running.

"L-Let's go, too!"

"Takasu wouldn't be able to stop her alone!"

"Seriously, what's going on with Tiger?!"

He didn't register the classmates who started running with him. *What's that idiot doing?* he nearly shouted as he ran up the stairs. He didn't have to search for the classroom she was in. He didn't know whether they were students who had fled from the classrooms among the screams or rubberneckers who had gathered to witness the source of the fire, but he yelled at them anyway.

"Get out of my way! Hey, out of my way! Open up a path! Taiga!"

Whoa, Takasu's getting in on it, someone yelled. Ryuuji pushed that person away as he arrived at the middle of the battle scene. The desks and chairs had been thrown into disarray. He looked into the middle of the scattered teaching materials and bags.

“Youuuuuuu iiiiiiiidddddddiiiiiiiioooooooooottttttttt!”

Sumire struck Taiga’s hands with an overhead blow, knocking Taiga’s sword away. Taiga calmly abandoned her weapon and wrapped her free hands around Sumire’s neck in the blink of an eye.

“Idiot, moron, fool, twit. You’ve been yapping away this whole time—”

“Guh!”

A punch sent her face flying up and to the side.

“Yah!”

She righted her head automatically but then got a backhand to the chin. The strength disappeared from Sumire’s knees, and her sword fell to the ground. She lost her balance. She might have fallen, but Taiga spared her nothing. As Sumire sunk down, Taiga rushed at her.

“Daaaaaaaahhh!”

“Uaah?!”

Taiga took the hem of Sumire’s jacket into her hands. Like magic, Taiga sent Sumire flying lightly through the air with a kick from her small body. Sumire fell onto the ground, back-first, her nose red from blood. Taiga’s face was just about as bloody as she tried to curl into a ball. Their blood-slicked hands worked in Taiga’s favor. As Sumire slipped, Taiga grabbed her hand and yelled like a beast as she flipped the situation around. Taiga put her weight on Sumire, grabbed Sumire’s hair, and raised her fist.

“St-stop! I don’t want this! Stttooooooooooooooooooppppppppppp!”

It was Minori who yelled. Ryuuji stopped her, practically sending her flying as she tried to recklessly impose herself between the two. If even Minori had gotten caught up in the fight, he didn’t know what he would do.

“Keep a hold of Kushieda!”

He yelled at someone who had grabbed Minori as she rolled down. Then Ryuuji jumped at Taiga.

“UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

He desperately held her from behind as she howled and shook. He used both his hands and all his strength to hold her back. Taiga probably didn't know whose hands those were anymore. With a shriek, she struggled to shake him off and got a knee to the stomach from Sumire. Even though she knew that Ryuuji was holding Taiga, Sumire didn't hold back on Taiga either. She hit Taiga's face two, three times, and this time Ryuuji had to hold Taiga's face to protect her. He was yelling at her to stop as he held Taiga and rolled onto the floor. Like a ball of rage, Taiga struggled in his arms. Sumire was grabbing his school jacket. She was no longer the logical president.

At that point, someone grabbed Sumire's arm. In that one moment, several people peeled Sumire away and held her until she was hanging off the ground.

"Leeeeeeeet goooooooo! You stupid idiotic tiger, I'll teeeeeaaaaaacccchhh YOOOOOOOUUUU!" Sumire's shout raked Ryuuji's ears.

"Whaaat?! What what what what what what whaaaaaat do you mean you'll teach me?! Like you know any better! You're just a coward!"

This time, as Sumire tried to engage again, Kitamura appeared to desperately hold back her arm. Taiga raised an even shriller voice.

"You talk like you're better than us! You act all great and saintly, but you're afraid of getting hurt! You're just afraid you'll hurt someone! Your cowardice, your fear is what hurt Kitamura-kun! I won't forgive you! I will neeeeeeeveeer forgive yoooooooouuuuu!"

Held back by Ryuuji, but still trying to kick, Taiga waved her feet around. As she struggled, she continued to shout.

"You coward! You're afraid! You're a crybaby who can't even face yourself! Crybaby crybaby crybaaaaaaaaaaby!"

"I'm fine being a crybaby, you're just a violent idiot!"

"Better than you, you escape artist! Try telling him! If you won't accept Kitamura-kun's feelings, tell him you don't like him! Say itttttt!!!"

"Shuuuuuuuudddduuuuuuuuppppp!!!"

Sumire tried to get some kicks in, too. Her slipper came flying off in a lucky

shot at Taiga's face. It hit Taiga's eyes, and because her hands were being held back, she winced in reaction. Sumire's voice choked and cracked.

"I...I can't lie! So...I won't say it!"

Sumire now changed tactics. This time she took off her other slipper and threw it as hard as she could, but it flew the other way, hit a locker, and fell.

"Aisaka, what do you know?! You don't know me! If I could become a simple idiot like you, I would! I want to be an idiot, too! I think about being an idiot who just always rushes forward..."

Her choked voice became dry and raspy. As though irritated at her own voice, Sumire folded herself over.

"If I said I liked him...then what?! That idiot! He would just try to follow me! If he knew I wanted that, he would do it! He probably wouldn't even blink at making any sacrifices! He's that kind of person so...because of that! Because of that, I can't be an idiot!"

As she writhed, tears thicker than blood fell down the cheeks of the completely impeccable student council president. Sumire shook her head like she didn't accept them, but no matter how she shook them off, the tears wouldn't stop coming. Her emotions and her words wouldn't stop flowing out either. She screwed up her face and continued to shout with her dry throat. She continued to cry out from the emotions she couldn't help but have.

"I...I want...to be an idiot, too! But...no...no...no matter...no matter what! I can't do...that."

Why had it taken him so long to realize that Kanou Sumire was also just an eighteen-year-old kid?

We're all just kids, Ryuuji thought. It wasn't an issue of whether they were idiots or not; they were all just kids. They were just kids who would cry and scream when the road they went down didn't go the way they wanted it to. They had all just been kids from the start.

Finally, the faculty started coming in. The adults came to address the situation.

Someone looked in worry at Sumire's face and checked for injuries. Someone else grabbed Taiga, who had been done in just as badly, and glared at Ryuuji when he reflexively stretched his hand to try to get her back. Their hands grasped at the air and let go. Taiga was pulled out into the hallway and led somewhere else.

The kids were in shock.

"The president is actually just really kind," said Kitamura.

"Ki..."

"I love you from the bottom of my heart! I'm glad we met! I'm glad I like you... that I love you! I'm really happy it happened! I have no regrets! Thank you for everything!"

They looked at each other, their faces still wet with tears. He gave her a deep and sudden bow. *Goodbye*, he muttered for his own sake. Then, he ran after the hooligan who had been taken away. He probably did that because they would need someone to explain what had happened.

The faculty member who was about to take Sumire to the infirmary also stopped to look at Ryuuji's face. He hadn't noticed a cut at the corner of his lip or the scratches running down his face from when Taiga had struggled with him and when he protected her from Sumire. They were probably taking Ryuuji to the infirmary, too.

Once the culprits were removed, the students of class 2-C were left uncomfortably behind, strangers in the strange world of the college-bound third years' classroom. As they were hesitating over whether or not to help clean up the classroom, someone who had bent down found the object.

"Huh...it's a student notebook..."

"Whose?"

In order to find the owner, several people peeked into it as someone leafed through the notebook. They found the name Aisaka Taiga.

"It's Tiger's... She must have just dropped it."

"We've got to keep it for her so she doesn't lose it. Takasu-kun... Oh, right."

“Who should keep it? ...Oh.”

“Uh...”

No one had intended to see it. They had just wanted to check for a name and close it, but the weighty plastic cover got stuck to the hand of the person holding it for just a moment. They accidentally saw the inside of the cover. That was it. Then everyone went silent.

It was in the notebook’s inside cover, in the folded over plastic. Everyone had seen the picture Taiga had carefully placed in her notebook. It was from the night of the culture festival. It was a picture of the two of them dancing. And then they knew that it was a memory so precious to her that she had put it in her notebook so that she would always be carrying it with her.

It was something so precious to her that, if Kitamura were so much as slighted, she would have gotten into a brawl for him.

“She really does like him...”

It wasn’t a rumor or a joke. It was the truth. It was a girl’s love exposed to the light of day. But, right then, the speechless person who held the notebook noticed another photo under the one of Kitamura and Taiga dancing.

“I’m going to keep this one.”

Before they could so much as think of looking at it, it was plucked out of their hands. Ami put Taiga’s notebook into her pocket. She seemed troubled as she smiled like an angel.

“Now, let’s all help clean up. Um... Senpai, we are truly sorry for the commotion. I can’t believe what Tiger did...”

“It’s all right. You didn’t do anything, Kawashima-san.”

“Right! It’s fine! Cheer up!”

If Ami were to so much as pout just slightly and turn her eyelashes down—well, that’s just what would happen. Joining in with the third years, everyone in 2-C started to help clean up, but there was one person who was frozen to the spot. Noticing that, Ami faintly narrowed her eyes.

Minori, who had lost her carefree smile, seemed to be thinking of something.

She knitted her eyebrows together as though she were trying to forget whatever she was thinking about. Then she shook her head. Just watching her do that, Ami thought, *I sort of get it.*

She stood up and changed her mind. *I'll leave it alone*, she thought, and she went back to picking up bundles of printouts from the floor. But then she stopped again. She noticed the weight of the notebook she had stuck into her pocket. She remembered what that person had looked like—the one she hated. That person had been frozen to the spot and expressionless just like Minori had been just now. She wasn't sympathetic. She wasn't, but...

“...”

Ami stood up. Like a cat, she approached Minori without so much as making a sound. She whispered just a few words into Minori's ear.

Do you feel less guilty yet?

“Huh...”

When she turned around, Minori's eyes were opened wide. The moment she saw Minori's face, Ami regretted what she had said. The weight hit her chest even more than she would have expected. But she didn't want Minori to realize that. She simply left Minori, who was standing straight as a plank, and slipped casually out of the third years' classroom without making a noise.

Once she was alone, she desperately and frantically went down the hallway and the stairs as though she were running away. She reached the wide landing where the vending machines lined up.

She couldn't make a sound.

“...!”

She had escaped into the gap between the vending machines. She put her forehead to the wall. *BAM!*

She had said something stupid. She shouldn't have said it. What had she wanted to accomplish by saying that? She thought she had become a better person. She wanted to become better. She did everything she could to be better. She messed it up. *Bam, bam.* She hit the wall twice again.

Right.

It wasn't just sympathy. She was jealous of her. And there were other things... There were a lot of other emotions involved, too. It was probably out of her hands now. She didn't even know what she wanted anymore. She couldn't do anything.

She wasn't doing anything right. She couldn't change. She couldn't become what she wanted to be.

In the deserted place, the sound of a head beating against a wall echoed three more unpleasant times.

Minori was so out of it, she cut herself as she tried to clean up a broken flower vase.

At first, they said Sumire might have broken her nose, but an X-ray turned up nothing. Her bones were actually so terribly dense that the doctors were taken aback. When her last day at school came, her face was a mess of bruises just as Kitamura's had been. She left her high school life carrying so many flowers she could barely hold them. Two days after that, she left Japan on an airplane.

Kitamura dethroned Ryuuji as the most pitiful guy in the school. It seemed the title of student council president just happened to come with his new throne.

For three days, Ryuuji had a face that would have been censored on broadcasts. He wasn't even that injured, but he looked like he had just fought the yakuza mafia. For some reason, Yasuko was oddly excited about her son's face.

Taiga was suspended from school for two weeks. At first, it seemed like she might have been expelled, but Kanou's parents couldn't bear having Taiga leave school when Sumire had also raised her fists and was studying abroad unpunished. They said that if Taiga were expelled, they wouldn't allow Sumire to study abroad, so the school had been lenient. In the end, the Aisakas hadn't even so much as taken a step into the school through it all. All of their communication had gone through a secretary over the phone. In the end, Taiga was accompanied by the bachelorette when she went to Market Kanou to issue

an apology and a thank you. After bowing her head and repenting, the Takasus waited worriedly for her on her route back home.

The bachelorette smoked her first cigarette in eight years and another permanent wrinkle etched itself into her forehead.

On that day, too, modest Orion twinkled above their heads in the winter sky.

Yasuko wasn't home when he came back from a day at school without Taiga. His mother might have gone to the convenience store, he thought. Ryuuji headed to his room to put away his uniform.

Beyond the window, he saw Taiga's bedroom. *That klutz*. He clicked his tongue slightly. Even though it was winter, Taiga's window and curtains were wide open. It seemed she was sleeping in the bed. He didn't have a complete view of the room, of course, but he could see the relaxed tips of her bare feet at the edge of the bed.

"Ahhh, seriously...aren't you cold?"

He tried to call her on his phone to wake her, but it didn't seem to be ringing in her bedroom. Even though she was in the middle of a suspension, she was having a happy-go-lucky afternoon nap... What a nice place to be.

He leaned out of the window and, while trying to keep his voice lowered for the neighbors, yelled, "Hey! You'll catch a cold! If you're gonna sleep, close your window!" He saw the feet flip over, but it didn't seem like she was waking up. *Maybe I'll leave her*, he thought.

"Really, what a slob..."

He realized that if she actually caught a cold, he would be the one taking care of her. Ryuuji left home still in his uniform. If he called her over the intercom from the entrance, even Taiga would get up. Once she got up, he'd take her with him to get groceries, he thought. There was a bargain sale on fish that day.

He went into the marble entrance and punched in her room number. It rang

with no answer. He was pushing the button with the finger of his right hand when he remembered Taiga still had his scarf. He wanted to have her bring it over so he could wear it, but he didn't know if he would be able to endure Taiga's complaints of, *I'm cold, I'm cold*.

At that time, the scarf was softly wrapped around Taiga's shoulders as she lay in bed. She was actually awake and unable to endure the constant ringing. She finally got up.

When the springs of her bed recoiled, the papers sloppily piled up on it fell down. The papers that fell included a draft for a reflection essay she had been assigned by the school and two postcards.

As the dreary spinster gave them to her, she had told Taiga, "This isn't part of the assignment." One postcard was for Kanou Sumire in America, to apologize to her. The other postcard was for the spinster, who said that Taiga could write anything she wanted in it.

She hadn't planned to do anything with it, because she wasn't required to, but she was so bored and had so much time on her hands that she thought she might as well write something. She had already decided on what to do for Kanou Sumire. The problem was the one she was sending to the spinster. Not writing anything or drawing a skull to irritate the teacher was too childish, so she was thinking of just coloring the whole thing in one color.

She was trying to figure out what color to use as she rolled around on her bed. She looked up at the sky and the clouds she could see from the window, and then looked at the Takasus' window.

She still couldn't decide on a color.

One day, a postcard came to the cramped room-share where Kanou Sumire was living with other study-abroad students. There was no return address, but

she knew who had sent it immediately after flipping it over and seeing the message.

There was just one word written on it—*Idiot*.

Sumire, who hadn't seemed happy since coming to that country, burst into an old man's hearty laughter so suddenly that the other lodger from her grade dropped their packed lunch.

Afterword

It's 8 PM on a Friday night, and I'm at a family restaurant. I was worried, as I was headed there, that there might not be any seats in the middle of the dinner time rush. Actually, this place is pretty empty. It seems there aren't many people in the world who come out of their way to eat dinner at a family restaurant on the weekend...but it's tasty...and convenient...and there's all you can drink soda fountains... Plus you can work, just like I am now...

I am Yuyuko Takemiya... I'll even spread tarako roe on my toast. I'll spread butter on it and then seaweed...

Now then. I want to thank everyone who was kind enough to take *Toradora!* 6 in hand and everyone who has continued to follow the series with me from the bottom of my heart! Thank you so very much! Though I'm an awkward novice, I somehow reached the sixth book! I was only able to write this much because this series drew your interest. You've really given me strength! If you had even the slightest bit of fun reading this book, I couldn't be happier!

Now I have something important to talk about. There's been a rumor that this might be the last book I'll write in my twenties. If you continue to follow the next volume, I might be IN MY THIRTIES...? Maybe? I might be. There is that possibility. The chances aren't zero. I wonder, now... Yeah, I don't know...

On that note, I have prepared myself to enter the world of my thirties to the degree I can. I have to because lately, when I talk to my girl friends who are my age, the topics that come up in conversation include "insurance," "cancer checkup," "inheritance," "interest rate," "pension," "inflation," "in the case of an accident"...

Oh, and there was that, too—the marriages, divorces, and pregnancies of actors. Even though we don't even know them, it's all about who they're with, whether their event was too showy, their dress was weird, or that their food looks good. It's all about whether something they did was good or bad, and after talking about this and that...we're four or five hours in, and that's even without alcohol involved... I'm doomed, aren't I? I can't protect myself from it

anymore. I'm declaring that I don't know what to do. I have a Gandhi-like proclamation about aging: *Do not resist the movement of time*. My strategy is the same as Shingen Takeda's. I'll be as dry as the wind, as withered as the forest, as burned out as the fire, and as crumbly as the mountain. This is a woman's war cry! I'll at least insure myself enough to pay for my own funeral service!

Also, I bought a beige granny undershirt! It cost four thousand yen— isn't that expensive?! But, as a woman ages, inexpensive granny undershirts are too cold and make your skin itchy because they're too rough. I couldn't endure it! I need my granny underwear to at least be on that level!

And so, somehow, please, please, continue to read the next volume: *Toradora! 7*—the chapter of Yuyuko's thirties~! Thank you for staying with me until the very end! Manager-sama & Yasu-sensei, I look forward to working together with you next time even as I age...

—Yuyuko Takemiya



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